

OVERUNDERCOOKED
PRESENTS



HOLD IT

TOGETHER

Hold It Together

Written by [OverUnderCookened](#)

- My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic
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- Main 6
- Comedy
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Description

There's only one pony in Ponyville that the Mane Six have never met. Pinkie Pie has never thrown him a party, Applejack has never sold him a mug of cider, and Twilight has never seen him check out any books. And as far as that unicorn, Lapis Print, is concerned, that's exactly how it should be.

Lapis can't risk them knowing where he lives, what he does for a living, or even what his name is - if he gets his way, the Mane Six won't even know he exists, and no pony in Ponyville will miss him once he's gone.

It should be a piece of cake - after all, it's not like the biggest magical power in Equestria is about making sure every pony looks out for each other, right?

(Rated Teen for language - mental cursing mostly.)

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The Summer Sun Celebration, Part 1

It was the day of the Summer Sun Celebration, and an exhausted-looking unicorn with a pair of saddlebags slung over his back was walking down the main road of Ponyville, his eyes sweeping the street and rooftops as if he were looking for something.

Besides his fatigue, there wasn't anything special about this unicorn. His coat was a creamy parchment-white, and his mane and tail, which were both roughly cut to average length, were dark blue. His mane, which stopped just above his brown eyes, had a thin, clear gray streak, but he wasn't old by any stretch - in fact, he looked pretty young, twenty years at most. His brown canvas saddlebags half-covered his Cutie Mark, which was a small, four-pointed white star on a clay tablet, a crack in the tablet's side disappearing beneath the spark.

The unicorn looked as if he had stayed up all night. His lower eyelids were dark and swollen, and a few strands of his mane had come loose. He still seemed alert enough, though, his ears up and forward as he scanned the rooftops.

He stopped as he spotted something on the side of a nearby roof, and a coat of magic wrapped around his horn - his magic was the same light-brown color as his eyes, somewhere between hot cocoa and coffee with cream. A single, cracked shingle popped off the rooftop, then floated down until it was a couple feet away from the unicorn's face. The unicorn shut his eyes, and the spark on his Cutie Mark glowed a pale blue - then, a flash of light engulfed the shingle.

When the light cleared, the crack in the shingle was gone. The unicorn opened his eyes and looked the shingle over - then grinned, and levitated it back into its place on the rooftop. The unicorn scrutinized it, satisfied, but he still seemed uneasy as he kept inspecting his surroundings.

A pigeon fluttered down from the rooftop, perching on the unicorn's back and covering a yawn with one of its wings. The unicorn looked back, and was only briefly surprised to see the bird.

"Hey, Nikki. Late riser, huh?" he chuckled. "Can't say I blame you."

The pigeon rolled her eyes, then turned and started taking in some of the decorations for the Summer Sun Celebration. So far, there wasn't much - an extra-fancy flower basket here, a pennant hung on a door there, the occasional sign bearing holiday greetings.

The other citizens were definitely more impressive than the decor. None of them were really dressed up - though, most of their manes and tails looked a little neater than usual, and one or two of the ponies were wearing small ornaments like ribbons or jewelry. All of them, regardless of getups, were busy - most were in pairs or groups of three, trucking supplies towards the Town Hall, where they'd end up staying awake all night to watch Princess Celestia raise the sun. Most of them were chatting as they went, excitement plain in their voices.

One or two ponies, though, were getting a head start on the commercial side of the festival, setting up little market stands with striped awnings on the sides of the road. The unicorn glanced down the rows, then paused when he saw an Earth-pony mare with a brown coat and a green-and-yellow mane placing a bag full of seeds on one of the counters.

"Excuse me, miss," the unicorn called out, trotting over. The mare looked up, then set another bag of sunflower seeds down on the counter, the seeds shifting over each other with a dry rustle.

"Sorry to bother you," the unicorn said. "Are you selling yet, or do I have to come back later?"

The mare shrugged. "Depends on whether I've unpacked what'cha wanna buy. I've got just sunflower seeds, just wheat, just oats, and..."

She blinked, recognition lighting her eyes. "...Say, aren't you the new repair-pony in town?"

“Huh? Oh, yeah, that’s me,” the unicorn said. “Lapis Print, but please just call me Lapis.”

“Nice to meet you! My name’s Yellow Petal,” the mare replied, smiling. She looked over Lapis’ shoulder, saw the pigeon perched there, and her smile widened. “So, anyway, those are my big bags, but I’ve also unpacked a few little snack-bags with mixes of oats, wheat, and sunflower seeds.”

Lapis grinned. “One of the little bags sounds perfect. How much?”

“Five bits.”

“Done.” Lapis floated five small golden coins up onto the counter, and Yellow Petal slid them out of sight before ducking down to grab one of the bags. Lapis, meanwhile, looked back at the pigeon, and saw that she was gaping up at him.

“Jeez, Nikki, what’s with the look?” Lapis said, chuckling. “What, you thought I was kidding? I said you’d earned a bag of birdseed, and I meant it. Just don’t get any shells in my coat, and...”

The unicorn trailed off as he noticed something approaching the road from above. *Huh, he thought. UFO coming in. Looks like a... golden chariot, maybe?*

Lapis’ eyes widened as the chariot got closer, and he was able to distinguish two winged figures ahead of the vehicle’s bulk. *Those are pegasi... armored pegasi.* Their armor was in a vaguely-Roman style, and was the same golden color as the chariot. Guards, maybe?

And if those are guards, then... wouldn’t it be the Princess in that chariot?

“Huh.” Lapis turned around, and saw that Yellow Petal had popped up from behind the counter. “Well, I don’t *think* it’s the princess. It might be one of her officials, though.”

“Really? How come?” Lapis asked, levitating the small bag of seeds off the counter and onto his back.

The merchant chuckled. “This’ll be your first time seeing the Princess, huh?”

“Uh, maybe.” Lapis grinned, his ears tucking back as he rubbed the back of his neck.

Yellow Print nodded. “Don’t worry about it. Trust me, she’s pretty hard to miss. My guess is, that’s some organizer-pony, come to make sure the Mayor knows what she’s doing.”

“Yeah, that makes sense,” Lapis said, turning to watch the carriage. That look of unease was back on his face, and it was intensifying by the second. *This festival, the chariot... they mean something important, but what?* “Uh, thanks for the seeds, Yellow Petal. And happy Summer Sun Celebration!”

“You too!” the merchant called, as Lapis walked a few buildings down the road. He kept his eyes on the chariot, eventually stopping under the shade of an awning. The pigeon on his back, Nikki, wasted no time pulling open the bag of birdseed and stuffing her beak, her expression blissful as she crunched away at one of the sunflower seeds.

Lapis, meanwhile, was laser-focused on the chariot as it came in for a landing, his eyes narrowed, his ears forward as he strained to learn anything about the chariot’s occupants.

“...I am her student, and I’ll do my royal duty,” a mare’s voice was saying. “But the fate of Equestria does not rest on me making friends.”

The carriage touched down with only a tiny bump. A second or two later, a lavender unicorn with a purple mane walked into view, turning to address the drivers. “Thank you, sirs.”

Lapis stared for a second, then leaned back and relaxed as he recognized the purple unicorn. *Oh, it’s Purple McBookface, he thought. Right. She arrives like this during... the first episode, right?*

He grinned as the details came flooding back. *Yeah, and then she meets the rest of the protagonists while checking on the town, and then the princess’*

evil twin sister shows up or something, and...

...Wait a minute.

Lapis froze as several puzzle pieces fell into place at once. I showed up... before the show started. I showed up before the show's plot-lines happened, and that means...

“Shit,” Lapis whispered, a look of barely-contained panic on his face.

The purple unicorn, whatever her name was, had started walking away from the chariot, accompanied by her lizard-thing sidekick. *Baby dragon, maybe? His name is Stick or Poke or something, I think.* The baby dragon was talking, leading the other unicorn towards a bubblegum-pink pony with a large, puffy mane. “...Come on, Twilight, just try!”

“Twilight... guess we have a name for her,” Lapis muttered, prompting Nikki to pull her head out of the bag of birdseed, blinking a couple of shells off her eyes. Then Lapis noticed who Twilight was talking to, and his eyes shot wide open.

Pinkie Pie, Lapis thought, slowly backing towards the nearest alley. *Don't see me, don't see me...*

“Uh...” Twilight said to Pinkie, her ears tucking back nervously. “Hello?”

Pinkie glanced over Twilight’s shoulder, and her eyes met Lapis’.

Uh-oh.

The pink pony gasped comically, jumping three feet clear into the air, shock on her face - then, midair, she launched towards Lapis in a pink blur, halving the distance between them at a terrifying pace.

Shit! Lapis grabbed Nikki’s bag of seeds with his magic, sprinting into the alley, Nikki letting out a surprised coo as she was brought along for the ride. He rounded the corner of a house, and wasted precious seconds

fumbling for something in his saddlebags. *Bits, spare request form, book, c'mon where is it?!*

Lapis yanked something - a full face-mask with eyeholes, that had a picture of a barrel crudely drawn on it - out of his bag and over his face. He straightened up and stood stock-still, sucking in a deep breath and holding it just as Pinkie rounded the corner.

Don't... move... Lapis thought, silently praying that Nikki got the same idea. Pinkie Pie stared around whoever's-backyard-this-was in confusion, looking over a trash bin, a recycling bin, Lapis, and a rain barrel with the same determined squint. She looked back -

Oh no.

- at the trash can, then approached it with slow, deadly silent steps - before yanking the lid off with one hoof. "Ah-ha!" she squeaked.

A raccoon poked its head out of the bin, rubbing its eyes and chittering in confusion. Pinkie blinked and pulled her head back in surprise, then smiled awkwardly and lowered the lid back onto the bin. She let out a small, disappointed sigh, then glanced around the yard again, her gaze sweeping over Lapis as if he really *were* a barrel, before finally settling on the middle distance.

"I'll find you, new pony," Pinkie said, her tone serious. "I'll find you..."

She frowned. "Huh. New pony. Hmm..." She scrunched her face in thought for a moment, scratching her chin with one hoof - then gasped again, before disappearing in a bubblegum-pink blur, Lapis' mane ruffling in the wind as she shot past him.

Five seconds passed. Ten. Twenty.

...She has to know, Lapis thought. There's no way. She's messing with me. She has to be.

“You know what?” he muttered, as he took the mask off and put it back in the bag. “As long as it works, I don’t care. You alright back there, Nikki... Nikki?”

Nikki’s beak had dropped, and she was staring at the space where Pinkie had been with a mixture of disgust and disbelief. As Lapis watched, Nikki made a helpless gesture towards the space, then at the mask inside Lapis’ saddlebag, then back towards where the pony had been, until finally she face-planted into the bag of birdseed.

A few seconds passed, and then Lapis grinned as he heard the crunching of birdseed from somewhere near Nikki’s face. *Yep, she’s fine. Wish I could say the same...*

Lapis’ grin faded as he remembered his earlier realization, what he’d put together as soon as he’d realized what episode he was in. He could hear himself asking Mayor Mare how the position of repair-pony had come open, could hear parts of her response echoing in his ears...

“I’m sure you’ve heard the rumors, that Ponyville is a bit of a ‘trouble magnet...’ It has been pretty quiet for the last five years...”

The quiet hadn’t been because the show *had* started. It had been because the show *hadn’t* started. Yet.

Oh, and also, the Princess’ evil twin sister was on the way. *That’s important. Should probably panic about that first.*

About ten seconds of silent panic later, Lapis took a deep breath, put on his business face, and marched back onto the main street. Pinkie was nowhere in sight, so he headed toward his favorite restaurant in town. He hadn’t seen any of the show’s six protagonists there yet, and avoiding them was second-highest priority.

First priority, right now, was a cup of coffee. Lapis might’ve been riding an adrenaline high right then, but he knew he’d be dead on his feet - *uh,*

hooves - as soon as it wore off. So, when he reached a triangular building at an intersection, he wasted no time hurrying inside, whisking the still-faceplanting pigeon on his back through the door with him.

The Corner Cafe, which the Mayor had previously insisted was “*not* the same place as the Cafe Hay,” was a cozy little brick-and-mortar building that looked like a Waffle House and smelled like a fresh pot of coffee. Not just any coffee, either - the *good* stuff, fresh-ground and right out of the pot.

“Got any empty tables?” Lapis started to ask the waitress, but before he could finish he heard a voice calling his name. “Hey, Lapis! Over here!”

He looked over and saw an earth-pony waving him down from inside a booth. She had a pale, creamy-yellow coat - almost like his, now that he thought about it - and a curly mane and tail which were half pink and half navy blue.

“You know what, never mind,” Lapis told the waitress, and trotted towards the booth. “Hey, Bon Bon, how’s it going?”

“It’s going, that’s for sure,” Bon Bon muttered. “I haven’t even opened the candy shop yet, and half the town’s knocked on my door already!”

The other pony in the booth, who Lapis hadn’t noticed previously, giggled and piped up. “Maybe if you stopped giving them sample bags, they’d stop knocking?” This pony was a unicorn, and she had a mint-green coat with a white-striped mane that vaguely reminded Lapis of toothpaste.

Bon Bon scoffed and rolled her eyes, but there was a hint of a smile at the corners of her mouth. “It’s called customer retention, Lyra. Just because I don’t want customers yet doesn’t mean I don’t want them at all. Oh, Lapis, this is my friend, Lyra Heartstrings. Lyra, this is Lapis Print, the town’s new repair-pony.”

“Hi!” Lyra chirped, scooting further down on the bench. “Nice to meet you!”

“Hey, nice to meet you too,” Lapis replied, smiling and taking the seat, Nikki landing on the table with her now-empty bag of birdseed.

Lyra’s eyes widened as she watched Lapis get into position. “Oh, hey, I thought I was the only pony in Ponyville who sat that way!”

Lapis blinked. “What?”

“On your rump, with your back hooves sticking out like logs,” Bon Bon said, cocking an eyebrow. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen anypony but Lyra sitting that way before, either. Doesn’t your back hurt after a while?”

“Not usually, no,” Lapis said, frowning and looking over Bon Bon. Now that he paid attention, he could see that she was sitting like a dog, with her front hooves on the seat in front of her tucked-in back hooves - meanwhile, Lapis and Lyra were seated like humans. “Well, not unless I’m like this for more than two hours. What’ve you been up to, Lyra?”

“Well, I’ve mostly been tuning my lyre.”

“For three hours,” Bon Bon said.

“Well, sometimes that’s how long it takes,” Lyra said. “I’ve *also* been helping Bon Bon with last-minute stocking-up. I helped her make enough drizzle for five hundred peppermints!”

“And I’m going to need every last bit of it, too,” Bon Bon said, grinning. “How about you, Lapis?”

“Mostly, I’ve just been wandering around and fixing anything that breaks,” Lapis said. “Although, I also bought my little friend here a bag of seeds, since she was able to help me figure some stuff out earlier.”

Nikki lightly cuffed Lapis with her wing, rolling her eyes and smirking. Lyra, meanwhile, seemed to have only just noticed that there was a pigeon on the table. “Oh, I didn’t know you could talk to animals! I’ll have to look for you the next time I can’t find Fluttershy!”

“I’m pretty sure any of you could talk to animals,” Lapis said, grinning.
“Just use the same words you use normally.”

“What she means is, she didn’t know you could understand the pigeon,” Bon Bon replied. “What’s her name?”

“Well, I’ve been calling her Nikki,” Lapis said, “and I can’t actually understand most of what she’s saying, but she’s been nice enough to hang around anyway. …Who’s Fluttershy, though? Can she understand animals or something?”

“Oh, yeah, she’s Ponyville’s animal expert,” Lyra said. “She’s amazing! Kinda shy, but amazing. I hear she’s getting a choir of birds to sing for the Summer Sun Celebration!”

“She is?” Lapis frowned, then his eyes widened as he remembered. “Oh, wait. Is she a pegasus, who hangs around with a bunny-rabbit? Kind of canary-yellow, long pink mane and tail?”

Bon Bon nodded. “That’s her. You’ve seen her around? I’m surprised, she usually avoids stallions.”

“I think I saw her once in the market street or somewhere,” Lapis lied.
“Think she might cause any trouble today?”

“What? No, never,” Bon Bon said, cocking an eyebrow. “That pony apologizes if *she* trips over *your* hooves, and I don’t think I’ve ever seen an animal do something she doesn’t want it to.” Bon Bon’s expression became suddenly ominous. “Now, Pinkie Pie, on the other hoof…”

“Oh, I actually got an invitation from Pinkie earlier,” Lyra chimed in. She levitated a small card up from under the table, and Lapis saw that her magic was the same vivid orange color as her eyes. “‘You’re Invited to Twilight’s Welcome-To-Ponyville Surprise Party.’ Who’s Twilight?”

“Purple unicorn with a baby dragon,” Lapis said. “I saw her earlier. She arrived in some golden chariot thing, I think the Princess sent her to check

up on the festival preparations. I... don't think she's really the social type, though," he added, remembering what she'd been saying to the dragon.

"Yeah, well, I'll probably be busy selling candy all day anyway," Bon Bon said.

Lyra shrugged. "I'm going. Pinkie's Welcome-to-Ponyville parties are great! You know that already, right, Lapis?"

Uh-oh. "Uh, yeah, about that," Lapis said. He felt his ears flick back, and he consciously flicked them back upright with an annoyed grimace. "I've actually... kinda dodged my welcome party so far."

The reaction was immediate. Bon Bon's eyebrows nearly shot off her face, and Lyra's jaw dropped.

"WHAT?!" three voices shouted at once. Lapis flinched, then frowned. Three voices?

Lapis, Lyra, Nikki, and Bon Bon all looked off to the side of the booth, where the waitress - a pegasus with a dark brown coat and a fluffy white mane and tail - was standing and gaping at Lapis. She blushed, then sheepishly smiled. "Uh, I mean... may I take your orders?"

"Okay, let's go over this again," Bon Bon said, propping her forehead up on her hoof. "How did you end up not meeting Pinkie in the first place?"

"I don't know," Lapis admitted. "I walked into Ponyville three days ago, I remember seeing her right before I turned a corner onto the main street. Ten seconds later, I bump into Mayor Mare, who had *somehow* just finished talking to Pinkie *about* me, and then I didn't see Pinkie for the rest of the day."

"No, wait. There's no way she lost you just because you turned a corner," Lyra said. "Last time I tried that, she rounded the corner before I did!"

“Uh, I’m not sure how it happened either,” Lapis lied. He’d actually done everything he could to blend into the crowds as soon as he’d recognized Pinkie as one of the show’s main characters, but there was no reasonable way to explain that. “Maybe I just got lucky, or something? It’s... I don’t know, but it happened, and here I am.”

“Right,” Bon Bon said. “So, after that, you started avoiding Pinkie on purpose, because you didn’t really want a Welcome-to-Ponyville party.”

“Pretty much,” Lapis said. That was the truth - as he’d reasoned it, one of Pinkie’s parties would’ve been sure to put him into the main characters’ radars, which was the *last* thing he wanted.

“Okay. How?”

Lapis blinked. “What?”

“How have you been hiding from Pinkie?” Bon Bon said, cocking her ears forward. “I know a couple of ponies who’ve tried it, but nothing worked. Her Pinkie Sense just leads her right to them.”

Cartoon logic, Lapis thought. “Well... here, it’ll be easier just to show you,” he said, reaching back into his saddlebags with his magic. Across the table, Lyra raised a bite of omelet to her lips, while Bon Bon peered intently forward.

Lapis glanced around, then put the mask on the table. “I wear this.”

For a second, all three of them stared at it in silence. Then Bon Bon gave Lapis a flat look, while Lyra snorted before breaking into a giggling fit.

“No, really,” Bon Bon said. “How?”

Lapis picked up the mask, and Nikki gestured to it with her wing. “Really, this is it. If I wear it, and I don’t move, she doesn’t find me. I came up with the idea as a joke, but since then, I’ve done it four times. One of them was... about fifteen minutes ago, actually.”

“Not a very funny joke,” Bon Bon said, raising an eyebrow.

Lapis shrugged. “Well, it’s more like a reference, but yeah.”

“So, wait,” Lyra said, trying to suppress her continued laughter. “You’re telling me, that you stick that on your face...”

“Yep.”

“And you hold... *reeeeeally* still...”

“Yeah.”

“And Pinkie looks at you, and thinks, that you’re a barrel?”

“I guess?”

Lyra’s giggles broke into snorting laughter. Lapis sighed, then tucked the mask back into his saddlebags with a grin. “Honestly, I’m half-convinced Pinkie thinks it’s a game, and she’s playing along for the laughs.”

Bon-Bon seemed to actually consider the idea for a second or two before shaking her head. “...No, I don’t think this fits with her sense of humor. But let’s get back on track. Why don’t you just go up to her, introduce yourself, and get it over with?”

“Uh, well, I’m still not completely settled in,” Lapis said, as Nikki cocked her head towards him with sudden interest. “My house is still a mess, everything’s in boxes, you know. And if she *does* decide to make room for the party by unpacking everything-”

Lapis paused. “Which doesn’t sound like it’ll happen, now that I say it out loud.”

“No, she’s done that before,” Bon Bon said, waving a hoof. Lyra nodded in confirmation, still giggling.

“...Alrighty then,” Lapis said, cocking an eyebrow. “Uh, yeah, if she does that, then I’ll have to re-organize everything. And that’ll take weeks to do, if all the repair jobs I’ve been getting are anything to go by.”

“Ooh! I’ve heard about some of those,” Lyra piped up. “You know, there’s a rumor going around that you’re actually using Mend-All spells for everything?”

Lapis hesitated, his ears tucking back. “I... don’t know if that’s true. I mean, I’ve fixed a lot of stuff, so it’s tough to-”

A sudden gust of wind blew open the door to the cafe, setting the bells above the door jingling and knocking a tray of drinks out of the waitress’ hooves. A few seconds passed - then, in the distance, some distinctly scratchy laughter began to echo into the shop.

Lapis recognized it immediately, and Bon Bon huffed. “Rainbow again... How many times this week do you think somepony’s asked her not to try any of her flying tricks above Ponyville streets?”

“About half as many times as I’ve had to pull tie-dye mane hair out of a crater in someone’s thatch,” Lapis muttered.

Lyra’s eyes widened. “Wait. What?! She crashes into ponies’-”

“Roofs, yeah. Luckily for her, most of the roofs around here are thatch, so it’s basically like landing in a big ol’ hay bale - I’d hate to imagine what would happen if she hit a tin roof.” Lapis shivered, then stood up.
“Speaking of which, something else is probably broken by now, so I’d better get going.”

“See you at the Summer Sun Celebration!” Bon Bon called out as Lapis left, Nikki flapping off the table and onto his back just before the door closed.

As soon as Lapis was out of sight of the restaurant windows, he glanced around, then turned toward the edge of town and picked up his pace, only slowing down for a moment when Nikki took off and landed on his head.

“What?” Lapis asked, looking up towards the pigeon now glaring at him over top of his horn. “Yeah, I know I’ve got nothing to settle in. It’s just... listen, it’s for the best if nob-” He paused, rolling his eyes. “Sorry, if *nopony*, or as few ponies as possible, spend any time inside my house. Especially not Pinkie, or any of her friends.”

Nikki cocked a feathery eyebrow, folding her wings across her breast, and Lapis sighed. “I know it’s weird, but I’ve got too much to keep track of without having to take any pony’s involvement into account. For now... I really hate to ask again, but I could use a little help. You mind standing by a window, making some ruckus if Pinkie starts heading this way?”

Nikki huffed, then shrugged and sat straight on top of Lapis’ head. Lapis smiled awkwardly, then sighed.

The truth was, Lapis’ hope was to figure out some way of getting back to Earth. Not that he *missed* living in the same world as war, plague, and inflation, it was just that he had too many problems back on Earth that would get bigger if he left them alone. His student loan debt, for example. And if he got remotely caught up in whatever the show’s protagonists were doing, well, he could kiss his spare time for research goodbye.

What he had to do was clear: stay alive, don’t get too attached to any of the ponies here, don’t make any more problems before getting back to Earth, and *definitely* don’t get any of the protagonists’ attention. Especially not Pinkie Pie.

Just like social distancing, sort of. Ish. ...Yeah, not really.

Grimacing, Lapis turned to face his destination: what looked like a tree, except with windows, lanterns, and a three-part door beneath a hanging sign: The Golden Oak Library.

Here’s hoping Pinkie hasn’t started arranging that surprise party yet, Lapis thought. He took a deep breath, then pushed open the door and stepped inside.

Much to Lapis’ relief, Pinkie was nowhere in sight. No decorations, either - he and Nikki had the library to themselves.

Nikki flew straight up to one of the windows and started peering around for any sign of Pinkie. Lapis, meanwhile, started working his way along the shelves, trying to figure out how the place was organized.

“*1001 Beetles*,” Lapis muttered, scanning the spines of the texts. “*A Hoofbook of Butterflies, An Abbreviated History of Weevils, An Amateur’s Guide to Keeping Bees...* Am I in arthropods? Biology? Entomology?” He glared at the lower spines of the books. “*Sure, keep the English language and alphabet, but asking for the Dewey Decimal system is just too much, huh?*”

Just for a moment, the titles of the books flickered, and Lapis’ eyes widened in shock as the crisp, clean letters were replaced with a multitude of small, simple pictograms - butterflies, spirals, and the like. Then, he blinked, and the texts were back in English.

“...You know what, that’s fair,” Lapis said, then went back to scanning titles without comment. *C’mɒn, c’mɒn, mægɪc mægɪc mægɪc, wɦr’z tɦe sɛkʃn ɒn mægɪc wɦn yu neeɖ it... Bingo!*

An entire three bookcases’ worth of shelves, all devoted entirely to works on magic. The books here were older than the rest, and looked to be bound in some kinds of thick sheets of treated canvas - the corners gilded with ornate swirls and engravings, the spines dotted with tiny images. Lapis briefly considered looking for any books that matched his Cutie Mark, but didn’t see one in the first few seconds. Instead, he returned to scanning titles, sliding three volumes off the shelf and into his saddlebags with magic: *The Horn is Quicker Than the Carriage: Transportation for the Time-Pressed Unicorn, Shape-Shifting and Other Ways of Escaping the Sordid*, and a textbook-sized behemoth of yellowed parchment titled *The Totaled Theories of Harmonick Resonance, and Their Applickation to Mending the Otherwise Irreparable*.

Then, a golden glimmer at the corner of his eye caught his attention. He turned, and saw a decent-sized, red-and-gold volume tucked between two treatises on elemental spirits, pressed far enough back into the shelves that it was almost out of sight. Frowning, he pulled it forward with his magic, peering at the title.

“The Elements of Harmony: A Reference Guide,” he muttered. “Elements of Harmony... aren’t those the McGuffins, or holy relics, or ideals or something?”

He pulled the book over and flipped it open, quickly scanning through the pages. *Yep, that’s what they are. Kindness, Laughter, Generosity, Honesty, and Loyalty... plus mystery element number six. Last known location... ancient castle of the royal pony sisters, in what is now the Everfree Forest.*

“While their exact capabilities are unknown,” Lapis muttered, now reading aloud, “we know some of their power from the legends of their use by the Princesses Celestia and Luna. Among these, some of the most notable-”

A sharp coo from the window shattered Lapis’ concentration, and he glanced up to see Nikki pointing to the window.

Pinkie. Lapis looked around for a back door, but only spotted an open window - so, tucking the fourth book into his saddlebag, he jumped through with a grunt, Nikki following soon after.

A moment later, Pinkie burst through the door, carrying a massive basket full of rolled-up streamers and banners. “And not a moment to lose!” she chimed, setting down the basket and grinning, then scanning the shelves. “Ooh! Cozy!”

Pinkie grabbed a hank of pastel ribbons from the basket with her mouth, then zipped past the shelves towards a balcony, trailing confetti in her wake. A single, shining piece of crimson paper swung through the air, eventually settling on the shelf where moments before, the reference guide to the Elements had sat.

Not long after, Lapis had found himself a quiet, wooded spot not far from the edge of town, and he was taking the opportunity to skim the book on shape-shifting spells. So far, he wasn’t understanding a thing.

Lapis sighed, then shut the book and leaned back against the tree trunk, levitating a blueberry out of the small, woven basket at his side and over to Nikki, who was perched on a nearby branch. He’d been hoping to figure out

a better way to disguise himself than hanging a badly-drawn mask off his horn, but that was turning out to be a longer-term project than expected. The author kept referencing things he didn't understand, like "starswirls" and "channelling spirals" and "accordant conduciveness," in ways that implied the reader already knew about them. Lapis felt like a kindergartener trying to read a doctoral thesis - confused, frustrated, and in need of a snack and a nap.

Absently, Lapis levitated the shape-shifting book back into his bags and took in his surroundings for a bit. *Heh. Not too ugly, for a cartoon.* He and Nikki were in a lightly-wooded glade, nestled behind a small-but-substantial wall of thorny blackberry bushes. The thorns hadn't been a joke, and Lapis had the hole in his saddlebag to prove it - but getting inside was well worth the effort. The sunlight slanted down through the branches in just the right way, casting dappled patches of gold-outlined shadow across the grassy floor of the glade. Peaceful and quiet, save for some...

...Oddly synchronized birdsong, now that Lapis bothered to stop and think about it. Lapis paused, cocking his ears, then sighed and turned to look in the direction of the noise.

Sure enough, there was an organized choir of birds sitting on a tree branch a few dozen yards down the road, singing a simple, regal fanfare in near-perfect harmony. Lapis stared at the birds for a few seconds, his head cocked to the side, then froze as he saw the conductor of the orchestra: a pale-yellow pegasus with a long, flowing pink mane and tail.

Flutterbye- no, wait, Fluttershy. Man, I really need to find somewhere besides my house to actually read in peace. Lapis grimaced, looking back at the glade. *I'd hoped this was it... Dammit.*

"C'mon, Nikki," he muttered. "We gotta go... Nikki? Nikki!"

Over on the branch, Nikki jerked awake with a questioning coo.

"Twilight's about to show up... I think," Lapis said. "Sorry to wake you up, but I gotta go. You can stay here, if you want - shouldn't be doing anything too exciting, I'm just heading to my house until-"

Nikki rolled her eyes, yawned, then flapped over and landed on Lapis' head.

"...Or you're still coming with," Lapis muttered. "Alright. Let's—"

"HELLO!"

Lapis flinched, and Fluttershy squeaked in surprise from down the road.

"Oh my." Lapis looked over to see Twilight addressing the pegasus. "I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to frighten your birds. I'm just here to check up on the music, and it's sounding beautiful..."

Man, she moves quietly when you're not expecting her. Do either of them see me? ...Nope, they don't see me. Let's get outta here, quick. Lapis glanced around, then squeezed past the thorn bushes and onto the main road, heading back toward Ponyville at as quick of a trot as would seem casual.

Not long after, Lapis had arrived at his place of residence in the village. It was a low, smallish wooden building that looked like a storefront. The outer walls were painted a warm, cozy hue of reddish-brown, and the roof was probably the only metal roof in the village (treated copper, painted over to look like ceramic shingles... for some reason.) To the right of the door, a broad, protruding series of square, yellowed glass panels created a large, curving window that reminded Lapis of a sixties diner - meanwhile, to the left of the door was a corkboard with three wooden buckets underneath.

Lapis wasted no time pushing open the door and hurrying inside, into the store proper. Warm sunlight poured in through the giant window, flecks of dust glinting like gold as they swirled through the air. Lapis' hoofsteps echoed through the building as he turned to shut and lock the door, Nikki's wingbeats no less jarring as she landed on the counter to the left.

Lapis looked around the room, taking in the single table and set of two chairs sitting beside the window. He'd only moved in three days ago, and

taken the job of repair-pony on from the mayor the same day.

The show's only just now starting... Dammit! Lapis sighed, his conversation with the mayor on that day echoing in his ears.

“...While it has been pretty quiet for the past five years, for the five years before that... well, there were six events that are now in history books, and all of them started or ended here.”

“All of them?” Lapis asked, trying to appear surprised.

Mayor Mare nodded, her expression weary. “Yes, all of them. I know the official story behind the Bullbear migration is that it started near Manehattan, but if you ask anypony in town, they’ll tell you that the Bullbears walked out of the Everfree first.”

Lapis nodded again, trying to appear as if he knew what those words meant. His nervousness must’ve passed for astonishment, because the mayor carried on.

“Anyway, if I said that the... strangeness... is the only reason that this town’s had trouble keeping a repair pony, I’d be lying. But it wouldn’t be a very big lie, and claiming that Ponyville’s been ‘pretty quiet’ for the last five years is only true by Ponyville standards. So, what I’m trying to say is... this job is not an easy one. It was very hard to keep up with the number of orders, even for seasoned repair-ponies with the best equipment they could get their hooves on.”

Mayor Mare sighed. “...And that’s really all that I’d say about it, if I weren’t in such a desperate situation. Right now, if some part of a pony’s house breaks, they have to either repair it themselves, or buy parts from out of town. And, well, to make a long story short, that means there are a lot more bits headed out of Ponyville than in.”

“Whoa-whoa-whoa, hold up,” Lapis said, cocking an eyebrow. “Are you telling me that your entire village’s economy is in decline because you’re missing ONE repair-pony?”

“Shh!” Mayor Mare had suddenly pressed her hoof against Lapis’ muzzle, almost faster than he’d registered her movement. She glanced around almost frantically, her ears tucked back against her head, then returned her gaze to his. “Not in decline, no. Just headed towards a temporary little recession.”

“Right,” Lapis said, pulling her hoof down. “I think I’ve got that.”

“And again, it’s really because we’re missing any repair-ponies, not just because we’re missing one,” Mayor Mare finished. She sighed again. “But yes, you seem to have the gist of it.

“So.” The mayor took a deep breath, suddenly all business. “With that in mind, my original offer still stands - and on top of that, I would be willing to rewrite a few bits of paperwork, which means that the cost of those monthly payments would be after taxes, instead of before them. Your job would mean that, on paper, you’d be an employee of the Town Hall, which would net you complimentary invitations to local events... that is, should you feel inclined to attend. And finally, if you accept, I’d be able to provide you with a five-hundred-bit bonus, to help you get your hooves on the ground. It would be... less than I feel you need, let alone what I feel you should have, but I’m afraid it’s the best I have to offer...”

Lapis shook his own head, dislodging himself from his memories, then sat at the table and took out the reference guide to the Elements, looking over the opening section as best as he could.

He’d taken the Mayor’s offer, of course. Based on her mentions of how “relatively quiet” Ponyville had been in the last five years, Lapis had assumed he’d arrived *after* the show’s protagonists had started solving local problems on a regular basis. He’d assumed that he’d have an easy job, he’d assumed that he *wouldn’t* get stuck cleaning up too many of the gang’s messes.

There was a saying about making assumptions, and Lapis wasn’t going to say it out loud - he had a sneaking suspicion that it might contain a racial slur, here.

I've gotten myself stuck fixing everything those six ponies break, Lapis thought, his eyes widening at the realization. I am going to die from overwork.

Focus. One problem at a time. For now... the Princess' evil sister is coming back down from the moon tonight, and Twilight and the rest end up... turning her good with the Elements, I think. So, what does that mean for your average citizen of Ponyville?

"It means a few extra hours of night, then business as usual," Lapis muttered. Nikki glanced over at him, and he waved a hoof. "Don't worry about it. Thinking out loud." *Should probably stop doing that.*

Lapis glanced out the window, stifling a yawn with one hoof. The sun was only just setting - he had time before the Mare in the Moon happened. A lot of time, actually. But he probably should try to stay awake. Tonight was important.

For the average citizen of Ponyville... a few extra hours of night, and then business as usual. But those few extra hours are going to be pretty terrifying. Lapis shivered, then stifled another, larger yawn. Wow. Really terrifying, actually. I can't even imagine what'd it be like, not knowing when the sun's going to come up. I mean, I know everything's fine, but... the rest of town, not so much.

...Eh. They'll be... fine...

Reading further into the *Reference Guide*, Lapis began to lose his train of thought, diverted instead to making a mental list of the Elements' capabilities. And, according to legend, there were a lot of them - the two biggest ones seemed to be petrification, as in turning some kind of goat-thing into a statue, and banishment, as in sending-the-Princess'-evil-sister-to-the-moon. But there were also a lot of less-certain things about the Elements, and Lapis found that it was growing harder for him to focus on those as he read on. *Possible origins, secondary abilities, effects on... Changelings, supposedly-resistant... forces...*

...

Somewhere outside, a heavy oaken door came shut with a *thunk*, and Lapis yelped as he jerked awake, the book falling off his face and onto the ground. From a corner of the table, Nikki trilled as her own eyes snapped open.

“What the...” Lapis muttered, looking outside. It was late evening... really late evening, and there was a sparse crowd of ponies headed toward the Town Hall. Lapis frowned, confused, then facehoofed as he realized that he’d almost slept through the Summer Sun Celebration.

“Sorry for waking you up, Nikki,” Lapis muttered, rubbing his eyes, picking up the book and tucking it back into his saddlebag. “I don’t think I can miss this one. Try and get some sleep, I should be back pretty soon.”

Nikki yawned, then shut her eyes and dozed off at once. Lapis, meanwhile, headed to the door, slung his saddlebags over his back, and set his jaw.

Let’s get this over with, he thought. Then, he opened the door, marched through, and set off towards the Town Hall, allowing it to swing shut behind him.

As Lapis walked into Town Hall, he kept his head down - partially to avoid attracting attention, and partially because his nose was buried inside of *The Reference Guide* again. He wasn’t really reading so much as skimming, looking for anything that vaguely resembled a blast radius - so far, the Elements of Harmony seemed precise for magical superweapons, but Lapis still wanted to be ready. Just in case there was some mess that needed fixing.

He shut the book once he was a few steps inside, tucking it back into his saddlebag and looking for someplace to stand that wasn’t too isolated. Unfortunately, Town Hall was mostly open space - there were some balconies here and there, supported by Roman-looking pillars and hung with banners and curtains, but taking shelter behind one of those would definitely be a little odd.

The goal here, Lapis thought, is to not get the attention of... Nightmare Moon, I think? Someone hiding behind a pillar or curtain before she even shows up would be really suspicious, if she noticed me... but once she does show up, what's one more frightened face in the crowd?

The plan was simple, then - all Lapis had to do was be one more member of the audience, and everything would be fine. He set off for an open spot on the floor, taking a seat among some other citizens, glancing around for any sign of Pinkie, then whipping out the *Reference Guide* and starting to read.

...Moving past the realm of recorded stories and into the murky muddle of pure speculation, we must wonder what other uses, besides the protection of Equestria, such a powerful set of magical foci as the Elements could provide. If their use could send a mare to the moon, then who's to say that they could not send other ponies to less permanent destinations? Bring their Bearer to the sites of trouble in a ray of rainbow light...

Interesting, Lapis thought. Doesn't sound like the Elements are to blame for my arrival here, though. Still, magical foci are potentially capable of transportation-

A fanfare of birdsong began to trill through the air, and Lapis snapped the book shut, tucking it into his saddlebags and training his gaze on the center stage, the murmuring of the ponies around him fading into a hush. Spotlights came down from the banner-strung ceiling above, training on the center stage. There, Mayor Mare stood, her cyan ascot as puffy as ever below her white shirt-collar.

...Why does she even wear those, anyway? Just to look fancy? Why not wear a whole shirt, then, instead of just the collar? Who even makes just a shirt collar?

“Fillies and gentlecolts,” Mayor Mare began. “As mayor of Ponyville, it is my great pleasure...”

Lapis tuned out the Mayor’s speech, looking around the room one last time. It seemed like every face in the hall was happy at the moment, either

smiling in excitement or wide-eyed in anticipation, cheering as the Mayor announced the speech.

There was only one exception. Half a dozen yards to Lapis' left was a purple unicorn staring up at a window. She seemed to spot something and flinched away, her ears tucking back as she looked at the stage, and Lapis' eyes widened as he recognized two things at once:

One, the purple unicorn was Twilight.

Two, she was *terrified*.

And for half a second, Lapis' mouth opened to say something, to reassure her, to say that everything would be fine. And then he remembered that saying so might change the fact. He turned away, grimacing, flicking his own ears upright atop his head, and glared at the stage. *Alright, Princess Edgy. Just get this over with. Don't make these ponies worry for longer than they need to.*

“...The bringer of harmony to all of Equestria... Princess Celestia!” Mayor Mare announced. The spotlights shifted to a balcony above the stage, the birds sang their fanfare, and a white unicorn pulled a rope to open the curtains, revealing... an empty platform.

“This can’t be good,” Lapis heard Twilight say. He said nothing, staring up at the balcony and tuning out the chatter. *Any second now. Come on.*

A tendril of sparkling indigo smoke wafted through a window, toward the balcony. It was followed by another, and another, more washing through the windows, their shape shifting like the Northern Lights. They coalesced on the balcony, concentrating into a churning, swirling mass - until suddenly, they parted, and Lapis was shocked to feel a jolt of fear run through him.

Just before he’d... arrived in Equestria, Lapis had discovered a genre of Internet videos called analog horror. A big part of the better videos were pictures of things that looked mostly-human, but were just warped enough

to fall into the uncanny valley. The resulting photos showed people that seemed normal, if distorted, but some ancient part of the human psyche took one glance and flagged it as a threat - as something that looked human, but absolutely *wasn't*.

The silver-armored, ink-black *thing* on the balcony looked like a pony. But it wasn't one. Its legs and horn were too long and thin, its ears and wings ended in points that were too sharp, and its eyes were narrow, utterly black slits inside of shimmering teal irises. In place of a mane and tail, it had that shifting, churning indigo smoke, that twinkled with faint light like dying stars.

"Nightmare Moon!" Twilight murmured, and Spike fainted off her back, flopping to the ground with a thud. Lapis shivered, then forced down his fear. *It's just a cartoon, dumbass! Get a grip! Come on!*

"Oh, my beloved subjects!" Nightmare Moon crooned, casting her gaze over the crowd before her, letting her voice echo in the stunned silence. Lapis suppressed another shiver as that slit-pupiled gaze passed over him, but she didn't so much as hesitate at the sight of him. "It's been so long since I've seen your precious little sun-loving faces."

"What did you do with our Princess?!" a scratchy voice called, and Rainbow Dash popped out of the crowd, hovering a few yards above ground level and meeting the monster's gaze with a glare. She tried to take off towards Nightmare Moon, but an orange Earth-pony in a Stetson held her back by her tail.

Nightmare Moon only laughed, a cold, brittle noise that sent a familiar twist of emotions through Lapis' gut. "Why, am I not royal enough for you? Don't you know who I am?"

"Ooh! Ooh!" Pinkie Pie began, but she didn't ramble for long before the same orange pony shoved a cupcake in her face. *Whoever that is, Lapis thought, they're alright.*

"Does my crown no longer count, now that I have been imprisoned for a thousand years?" Nightmare Moon asked, her face twisting in anger, her

wings lifting her from the ground with slow, snapping beats. “Did you not recall the legend? Did you not see the signs?”

“I did! And I know who you are!”

It was Twilight, and the crowd of ponies around her took several steps away from her as she spoke, glancing nervously between the mare and the monster as if expecting a duel to erupt at any moment.

“You’re the Mare in the Moon,” she said. “Nightmare Moon.”

The monster smiled into the gasps that followed, her eyes gleaming. “Well well well. Somepony who remembers me. Then, you also know why I’m here.”

“You’re here to... to...” Twilight began, her voice faltering as she looked around her, seeing the ponies’ faces turning to her, waiting for something, anything, that might tell them how unsafe they were. And again, the monster laughed.

“Remember this day, little ponies, for it was your last. From this moment forth...” Nightmare Moon spread her wings wide, her lips splitting to show too many narrow, pointed teeth as her mane and tail grew into a swirling, thundering vortex above. “The night will last forever!”

Gasps and screams filled the air, and above it all, Nightmare Moon’s laughter continued to ring out, cold and clear and sharp as black ice. Lapis stood stock-still, paralyzed, his gut twisting with emotion more strongly than ever before. Fear, and anger, and...

“Seize her!” Mayor Mare boomed, pointing her hoof. “Only she knows where the princess is!”

Three guards took to the air. Nightmare Moon’s head snapped to face them with uncanny speed, her eyes flaring white as she reared up, and Lapis’ fur stood on end just as he recognized the smell of ozone. The guards had no time to react, bolts of lightning sending them spinning back to earth with sharp cracks. The monster didn’t hesitate, her mane and tail pulling around

herself like a shield, and then rushing toward the doors, sending ponies screaming and jumping out of the way, Lapis crouching down as he prepared to-

And then the smoke cleared, and Nightmare Moon was gone, and... shockingly, no ponies seemed hurt. Rainbow escaped her restrainer a moment later, zipping out the door in a prismatic blur and out of sight. Twilight was the next pony through the doors, taking off at a gallop toward the edge of town, Spike slung over her back.

...That was... unsettling. Lapis took a slow, shaking breath, letting the tension leave his limbs as the rest of the building's occupants realized that nobody seemed hurt, save for the guards - who had only just gotten up, and were wincing as they touched the scorch marks on their coats. Lapis sat down with a thump, shutting his eyes against his fatigue, trying to clear his mind and think. *What happens next? Come on! No time to waste! What happens?!*

Rainbow chased Nightmare Moon for a bit, but there's no way she caught her. Pinkie, Fluttershy, and... uh, the other two, I don't know. But I saw Twilight heading for the edge of town, to go... where?

“Hey! Equestria to Lapis!”

A hoof came down on Lapis' shoulder, and he spun to face its owner, his eyes snapping open. Bon Bon was standing there, her hoof halfway off the ground, her glare melting into a look of surprise.

“Sorry,” Lapis muttered, shoving his panic back down. “What is it, what's the matter?”

“Besides the obvious, you mean? You are,” Bon Bon said, putting her hoof back down. “Are you doing alright? As soon as...”

“I'm fine,” Lapis said, then rolled his eyes as he flicked his ears back upright. “Well, as fine as any of us can be, anyway. Just trying to figure out what happens next.”

“Who knows,” Bon Bon muttered.

I do... wait, I do! The library! Lapis realized. *Twilight was headed to the library, to look up information on the Elements of Harmony! Then she and her friends head out for the forest, and go through some trials or whatever, and then... they beat her, somehow. With the Elements. What do those do, again?*

Mayor Mare was talking as Lapis reached into his saddlebag and pulled out the *Reference Guide*, but right then it was just background noise. He started flicking through the book to the *Recorded Uses section*, then slowed down as a set of words caught his eye. *There are six Elements of Harmony, but only five are known...*

“Wait a second,” Lapis muttered, as an all-too-familiar tingle settled into the pit of his stomach. “I’m forgetting something.”

“Like what?” Bon Bon said, cocking an eyebrow at him.

“Like something about this book,” Lapis muttered. “It’s about the Elements of Harmony, and-” His eyes shot wide open, and his gut lurched. “...I’ll be right back.”

“Wait, what?” Bon Bon said, but Lapis had already stood up and taken off for the door at a gallop. “Hey! Come back here!”

...

“Shit, shit, shit!” Lapis hissed, as the library came into view ahead of him. “I’m a fucking *idiot!*”

Twilight was in that library, right now, looking for information on the Elements of Harmony. A reference guide, to be exact. But that reference guide wasn’t in the library - it was in Lapis’ saddlebags, because he just had to go and stick his nose in the *stupid fucking MacGuffin book!*

The library was within a few dozen feet now, and Lapis slowed down, gasping and puffing for breath. There was a small crowd of ponies

advancing on the library, too, and Lapis identified one of them as Pinkie by her bouncing gait. *Well, there goes sneaking into the building. Plan B it is.* Grimacing, Lapis made his way around and out of sight to the window he'd jumped through previously, opening it just in time to hear a door closing.

Lapis took a moment to steady his breathing. *Okay. This'll be tricky, but I've got it. Get this book in front of Twilight, or else Equestria is doomed. Do it without being spotted, or else I'm doomed. I was fast enough getting here, she might not have even noticed the book is missing. It's pretty quiet in there right now, so I should be able to-*

A crash jolted him free from his thoughts, quickly followed by the sound of multiple books hitting the floor. Lapis winced, then hazarded a peek through the window.

Twilight was inside, frantically pulling books off the shelves and throwing them to the ground as soon as she'd glanced at them. "Elements, elements, elements..." she was muttering. "How can I stop Nightmare Moon without the Elements of Harmony?!"

Lapis winced. *Well, so much for getting it done before she notices.*

"And just what are the Elements of Harmony?!" Rainbow Dash's voice snapped, and suddenly she was there, nose-to-nose with a startled Twilight. "And how did you know about Nightmare Moon, huh?" Rainbow's eyes widened with fury. "Are you a spy?!"

...Really?

Someone inside seemed to share Lapis' complaint, because Rainbow was suddenly yanked away from the innocent unicorn. Lapis leaned just a little further, and grinned as he saw the same Stetson-wearing Earth-pony from the town hall - orange coat, golden-yellow mane and tail, green eyes. Not far behind her were Pinkie, Fluttershy, and the white-coated unicorn who'd pulled open the curtain.

"Simmer down, Sally. She ain't no spy," the Earth-pony said. Then, she turned and took a few, careful steps toward Twilight. "But she sure knows

what's going on. Don't you, Twilight?"

The other ponies all crowded forward to listen, Twilight shut her eyes and sighed, and Lapis saw his opportunity. Slowly, carefully, he levitated the book through the window and onto the nearest bookshelf, then ducked back into cover and let out a relieved sigh as Twilight began speaking. *Orange, whatever your real name is, you're a godsend. Now all I need to do is make sure they find the book...*

"...But I don't know what they are, where to find them," Twilight was saying. "I don't even know what they *do!*"

"*The Elements of Harmony: A Reference Guide!*" Pinkie's voice chirped, and Lapis froze as he realized that she was right next to the window.

A moment later, Twilight spoke again. "How did you find that?!"

Don't be suspicious. Don't be suspicious. Don't be suspicious...

"It was under E-e!" Pinkie sang.

"...Oh," Twilight muttered, and a moment later, the sound of turning pages filled the room. "*There are six Elements of Harmony...*"

Lapis slumped to the ground in relief, and stayed there for a few seconds. *I did it... I did it. Town's saved. ...Well, not yet, but it will be.*

Shaking, Lapis got up and headed back for Town Hall at a slow walk, failing to notice the patch of sparkling smoke that took his place at the window a few moments later. *I need a nap, he thought.*

The sound of Nightmare Moon's chilling laughter echoed in his ears, and for a second, he remembered sitting behind a two-foot-wide slit of a window in a yellow-painted room the size of a closet, the feathery snow outside coming down thick enough to white out everything beyond arm's length.

Lapis shivered as the knot of emotion in his gut twisted again. *Or a drink. Maybe both.*

He didn't notice the sparkling indigo smoke that had been lingering in his shadow, didn't see it stop in place after he thought of that laughter. The smoke stayed there for only a few seconds, then took off for the Everfree Forest.

Not until the sound of a door opening echoed down the street did Lapis hazard a glance back, just in time to see all six of the ponies trotting out of the library, toward the dark patch on the horizon that Lapis knew to be the Everfree Forest.

Good, they're getting started, he thought. He turned to leave, but stopped, looking back. ...Without saying anything to anyone about where they're going? Just... leaving the entire town to worry about what's going on?

Lapis sighed, then turned himself back toward the center of town and started walking. *Heroes gotta hero, I guess. It's not my problem, I've just got to wait-*

“LAPIS PRINT!”

“Gah!” Lapis yelped, spinning to face the speaker. “F- Bon Bon, you about gave me a heart attack just then! Don’t sneak up on ponies that way-”

“Oh, she about gave you a heart attack?” Lyra said, trotting into view from behind a scowling Bon Bon. “Lapis, the way you galloped off, we thought your house had caught fire or something! What was that about?!?”

Lapis groaned. *Alright, time to bullshit.* “It was about Twilight Sparkle, the Princess’... emissary, envoy, student, whatever. The purple unicorn, the one who knew who Nightmare Moon was. I...” He paused, taking a second to come up with a plausible explanation. “I saw her heading out, and I thought she might be able to do something about getting the Princess back. I was able to catch her and some other ponies - Rainbow Dash, Pinkie Pie, Fluttershy, and two others I didn’t know, heading into the Everfree.”

Lyra gasped, and Bon Bon huffed and rolled her eyes. “Great. Now, on top of everything else, the Mayor needs to organize a search party, too.

Describe the other two?"

Lapis blinked. *Let's maybe not get a search party, that might throw off the script...* "Uh, an orange Earth-pony with a brown hat, and a white unicorn with a purple mane."

"Applejack and Rarity," Bon Bon muttered, her eyes narrowing. She sighed. "Well, if Applejack's there, then they've got a good reason to go. She's the orange pony," Bon Bon added. "Part of the Apple family, has a few bits more common sense than the other ponies in the envoy's... expedition."

"Wait, why are they going into the Everfree at all?" Lyra asked, her ears tucked back as she stared at the forest. "Won't all the extra night just make it even more dangerous in there?"

Lapis hesitated, watching Lyra's knees start to quiver. *She's... terrified. They both are - hell, the whole village probably is. I would be, too.*

...You know what? Fuck it.

"They were talking about some magical artifacts hidden in there," Lapis said, and at once, Lyra and Bon Bon perked up. "The Elements of Harmony. Apparently, they might be able to stop Nightmare Moon."

"Are you sure?" Bon Bon asked, leaning forward.

"Positive," Lapis replied. "Twilight definitely seemed to know her magic, and she is the princess' student. If anyone in this village knows what to do about Nightmare, it's her."

Bon Bon nodded slowly, and a cautious, hesitant smile crept across Lyra's face. "So... that means we only need to hold out until they defeat Nightmare Moon?"

"If they can..." Lapis said. "...Yes."

Lyra's smile widened, and even Bon Bon exhaled a sigh of relief. Lapis watched, and felt half a smile creep onto his own face.

Lapis knew he shouldn't have gotten involved. He knew that he didn't have to do anything at all, and that everything would still turn out alright, because that was just the kind of show this was. He knew that every pony he interacted with, every pony that he made a good impression on, would be one more potential interruption on the path to getting back to Earth.

But maybe, as long as it wasn't Twilight and her friends... maybe it was alright to make an exception. Lyra and Bon Bon had cared enough about his welfare to chase after him, it was the least he could do to help them keep calm.

Maybe, just maybe, it was okay to care about the ponies around him.

Author's Notes:

Hey, everypony, and welcome to the fic! I'm a bit late to the party, I know, but better late than never, right?

So, basically we're looking at what it says on the box. One more Ponified Human in Equestria fic for the pile, except the human isn't allowed to interact with the Mane 6. I've done *some* plotting ahead, so I'll probably be writing this at least until Lapis is done settling in. After that, I'll keep going until I get bored of it, which sadly may not mean "until it's done." So... care about this story at your own risk, I guess?

Oh, I should mention, I *am* working with some ground rules here, so that I don't end up writing The 10,000th Power Fantasy Isekai Harem Anime: Equestria Edition. These are listed below, so read them if you care, head to the next chapter if you don't!

The We-Shalt-Nots

- **Alicorn-ify the MC.** Let's be real, here - he'd magic himself home as a human, with a great big pile of gold, and then spend the rest of his life trying to forget that one time he was a god. Which, don't get me wrong, would make for a fun short story, but would also make for a

terrible conclusion.

- **Build a harem around the MC.** That's... kind of a *lot* of mane-care products to keep in one shower, and a lot of ways to split your attention away from earning enough money to successfully pay off your student loans.

- **Write Edginess.** I'm definitely biased about what counts as "edginess," but I'll do my best, which means no torture/self-harm/slow and gruesome character deaths. Also, I'm not going to just throw in a serial killer or a Sith Lord for funsies, and the only pony who's allowed to say stuff like "I am the shadow that stalks in the night" is Luna. (She is required to say it with her most prim and proper voice, and to be confused when the ponies around her start giggling.)

- **Write Gary-Stuage.** Pronounce that word so that it rhymes with "sewage." Again, I'm probably biased, I'll do my best. He's not going to be the "All Good Characters Like Me, All Bad Characters Hate But Secretly Like Me" guy, he's going to be either "the repair guy who keeps showing up in weird places" or "uh, who?"

The Summer Sun Celebration, Section B

Lapis, Lyra, and Bon Bon trotted into the Town Hall just in time to find complete chaos.

Lapis felt his jaw drop as he took in the sight of ponies running around and screaming like chickens with their heads cut off, or else sitting in corners, rocking back and forth, and hyperventilating. Mayor Mare was up on stage, trying to make herself heard over the noise, but it was clear from her over-wide eyes and tucked-back ears that she was panicking just as much as every other pony in the room. In the back of the room, a pale pegasus slipped on a purple Earth-pony's tail, promptly falling flat on her face with a ground-shaking *thump*. Mayor Mare yelped at the noise and fell to the floor, covering her head with her forehooves.

“Wow,” Lapis muttered. “Well, at least it’s not violent...”

“Don’t say that, you’ll give them ideas,” Bon Bon replied. “Know any megaphone spells?”

“Uh... no.”

“Oh, what good are you, then. Lyra?”

“I can whistle really loud!” Lyra chirped, raising a hoof. “I used to do it all the time, before I figured out how to play-”

“It’ll have to do,” Bon Bon said. “Ready? On three. One. Two...”

Lyra frowned, then sucked in a breath.

“Three!”

A shrill, piercing whistle erupted from Lyra's pursed lips, and Lapis winced as he felt his ears tuck themselves flat against his head. All through the room, ponies cringed away from the noise, turning their heads and scrunching their eyes shut. It went on for a good ten seconds before Lyra finally ran out of steam, and Bon Bon stepped forward, puffing up her chest and glaring toward the suddenly-still crowd.

"Alright, everypony, listen up!" Bon Bon barked, and suddenly Lapis couldn't help but imagine her as a drill sergeant. "Princess Celestia's student has dispatched herself and a team of... qualified ponies to enter the Everfree Forest and stop Nightmare Moon. Until she succeeds, we need to keep this town in order, and that means *not* panicking! The next pony I see galloping in circles and screaming is going to end up patrolling the border, alone. Is. That. Clear?!"

Nopony moved a muscle. Bon Bon straightened her back and nodded.
"Good. Now, Mayor Mare, where do these ponies need to be right now?"

Mayor Mare picked her head up from beneath her hooves. "What? Oh. Oh!" She scrambled to her hooves, forcing a grin as she dusted herself off, then cleared her throat. "Right now, the safest place for ponies to be is inside their own homes. Whatever the Princess' student is doing right now, it's sure to take a while, so—"

"Are you saying we're supposed to just sit on our hooves and *wait*?!" snapped some pony in the crowd, and a ripple of worried murmurs spread in the wake.

"Absolutely not," Bon Bon said, stepping forward and putting her hoof down. "Day or no day, ponies still need to eat, sleep, and keep each other safe. So..." Bon Bon trailed off, glancing at Mayor Mare.

"...So," Mayor Mare finished, "we'll need to make sure that can happen. First things first... let's make sure ponies can see. I need twenty volunteers, to find and light enough lanterns to keep Canterlot Boulevard and the main plaza bright enough that we won't trip on our own hooves. Oh, and how many of you can cook?"

A few ponies raised hesitant hooves, and the mayor nodded. “Everypony who just raised their hooves, go stand on that side of the room. In a little while, I’m going to show you to the food reserves. You’re going to be making emergency rations for the whole town, so once I’ve shown you where the oats are... well, you’d best find any ponies that you can trust not to burn oatmeal...”

As the mayor continued to issue orders, Bon Bon stepped back between Lapis and Lyra, heaving a quick, relieved sigh. “Thank goodness.”

“That was some quick thinking, Bon Bon,” Lyra muttered, glancing between her and the mayor. “Have you done anything like this before?”

“No, but I know the Mayor,” Bon Bon replied. “She’s a decent pony when things are running according to schedule, but as soon as something unexpected happens...” She cut herself off. “Well, I gave her the push she needed, and it looks like she’s back in her stride.”

“No kidding,” Lapis said, watching Mayor Mare lead the group of conscripted cooks toward a closet to the side. “You think she’ll need any more help?”

“I hope not,” Bon Bon muttered. “But right now, we need to be worrying about any actual danger.”

“Danger?!” Lyra squeaked, her ears tucking back. “But... wait, won’t the guards take care of that?”

“They already are. If they remember their training, they’re patrolling the village,” Bon Bon said. “But there’s a lot of Ponyville, and not very many guards, so if I were them, I’d only be patrolling the border of the Everfree.”

And how do you know what the guards are trained to do? Lapis thought, frowning at Bon Bon. “Hey, hold up a second,” he said, as something else occurred to him. “Does Ponyville have any neighboring towns? Anywhere that we should send messages to, to let them know what’s going on?”

Bon Bon and Lyra both froze.

“Wait,” Lyra whispered. “Bon Bon, do you think anypony outside of Ponyville knows what’s going on?”

“You know, I don’t think they do,” Bon Bon said, her eyes wide. “But... well, the only place near enough to send a messenger to is Cloudsdale, and none of us are pegasi.”

“But we have to tell them!” Lyra said, turning to face her friend. “Bon Bon, they’re probably an even bigger mess than we are right now!”

“Don’t worry, I got it!” a voice called from across the room. Lapis, Lyra, and Bon Bon all looked up at once, just in time to see the cloudy-gray pegasus from before take off towards a window - and then ram, face-first, into the wall beside the window.

Lapis winced, and Bon Bon huffed a sigh. “Derpy, no offense, but we might need a different pegasus for this one.”

“No, no, I got it,” said ‘Derpy,’ pulling her face off the ground with a pop. To Lapis’ surprise, the pegasus’ eyes were looking in two completely different directions, neither of which was forward. “Just gotta get outside first, and I’ll be there in no time!”

“No, you’re not going to fly anywhere at night, especially not outside of Ponyville town limits...” Bon Bon said, trotting over toward Derpy.

“...Is she okay?” Lapis muttered, glancing over at Lyra.

Lyra nodded, sighing. “Yeah, she’s alright, her eyes just kinda... do that. That’s Derpy Hooves, the town mail-pony. She’s good at her job, but a little clumsy.”

Well, that explains why I’ve been fixing so many broken mailboxes, Lapis thought, and he immediately felt bad for thinking it. “You think it’s a bad idea to let her fly to, uh, Cloudsdale?”

“Normally, it’d be no problem, but tonight...” Lyra stopped, her eyes narrowing in thought. “Or... today, I guess? Today, it could be an issue.”

Lapis nodded, glancing back at the pegasus. “Still, maybe we should let her know that we’re sending somepony. Just in case she has family over in Cloudsdale.”

“And as soon as somepony’s been sent, I will,” Bon Bon muttered, trotting back over from where she’d been talking to Derpy. “Right now, though, we have to focus on the danger to Ponyville. If something comes out of the Everfree, well, that’s where the guards are. They’ll take care of it. The real issue is what might happen if somepony inside the village starts causing trouble.”

“Causing trouble?” Lyra said, cocking her head. “But… it’s already an emergency, why would anypony cause trouble?”

“They wouldn’t do it on purpose, they’d be panicking,” Lapis said, the gears already turning in his head. “But what would we even do?”

“We’d figure out where everypony else is, and wait there,” Bon Bon said, grinning. “The town square.”

Bon Bon and Lyra turned and headed for the door. Lapis went to follow them, but paused when he saw Derpy scowl and scrunch her mis-aligned eyes in determination - then she took off, heading for the ceiling, but swerved just in the nick of time to pass through the window instead.

Lapis briefly considered trying to stop her - there was a fair chance she’d hurt herself, after all. But, I don’t have wings. And… well, even if I did, I don’t think I’d use them this time. If it were my family, I wouldn’t stop just because of one random pony.

…Besides, somehow, I think she’s got this. Lapis nodded, then turned and hurried to catch up to Lyra and Bon Bon.

Yeah. She’s got this.

Lapis felt his jaw drop as he reached the town square. *Huh... not so panicky and useless after all, are they?*

Ten minutes ago, the town square had just been one more wall of darkness, but whoever Mayor Mare had put in charge of illumination had been good at their job - wrought-iron and glass lanterns were scattered across the stone of the courtyard, so that the entire square was lit by dim, amber-hued circles. It almost looked like a modern-art piece; there were enough ponies seated or waiting in line, their colorful coats and manes contrasting against each other, that it looked as if a few dozen buckets of paint had been emptied across the square at random.

Along one side of the square was a single long row of splintery tables, where Mayor Mare's designated cooks ladled oatmeal into the waiting ponies' bowls. In one corner was the single biggest cauldron that Lapis had ever seen - a boulder of glinting pewter at least twice as tall as he was, with a roaring bonfire underneath and steam almost thick enough to be a cloud rolling off the top. As he watched, a well-built maroon stallion with an orange mane approached the cauldron, a smaller pot gripped in his teeth as if it were a basket. He climbed up a nearby stepladder, dunked the pot over the cauldron's rim, and brought it back full to the brim with oatmeal, before climbing back down and trotting the pot toward one of the tables. Lapis could smell the oatmeal from here, and it wasn't just plain - apple chunks with cinnamon and nutmeg, and maybe some crushed pecans?

It smelled delicious, but he seemed to be about the only pony that was enjoying the aroma. As he started making his way into the crowd, passing by little circles of ponies huddled around lanterns to eat, all the faces that he saw were tense - ears upright and flicking around to catch any noise, their eyes darting to the edge of the square as if expecting something to jump out and start attacking at any moment.

So... panicky, but not panicking, Lapis thought. You know what? That's fair. Not like I'd be much better.

“There you are!” Bon Bon snapped, and Lapis turned to see her trotting toward him from one of the tables. “I swear, I take my eyes off you for three seconds- Never mind. So far, everything’s been alright, but we’d still better not drop our guard.”

“No kidding,” Lapis replied. “What needs done?”

Bon Bon blinked, her ears flicking suddenly upright. “By you? ... Well, Granny Smith’s cooking pot is about ready to break. Do you have the magic to spare-”

“Yep,” Lapis said. “Just point to her, and then get me as soon as anything else is broken.”

“Well, if you’re sure... She’s all the way over there, at the end of the tables.”

Lapis nodded, then started trotting in the appropriate direction. There stood a pale green Earth-pony with a white mane and tail, both of which were tied back into tight, no-nonsense buns. She was old, old enough that Lapis could practically hear her joints creaking as she jerked the ladle of her pot in slow, crooked circles. Her cooking pot was in bad shape, one of the mounts for its handle looked like it was about to fall off.

“Excuse me, miss,” Lapis said, coming up to stand next to the old mare.
“Sorry to bother you, but-”

“Whaaaa?” asked Granny Smith, cupping one hoof to her ear.

Lapis leaned closer, then continued. “I heard that you needed help with-”

Granny Smith scowled, putting her hoof down. “Help, with oatmeal? Now, you listen here, sonny. Ah’ve been makin’ oatmeal fer fifty years ‘fore you were a twinkle in yer sire’s eye, and Ah’ll go on makin’ oatmeal fer another ten yet. So if y’all wouldn’t mind, Ah’d thank you to leave the cookin’ to the per-fessionals.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t dream of messing with your oatmeal recipe, the smell had my mouth watering from the other side of the square,” Lapis quickly said, raising a hoof apologetically. “It’s the cooking pot I’m here to help with. The handle isn’t looking too good, I’m over here to fix it.”

Granny cocked a snow-white eyebrow, glancing at the steaming pot of oatmeal and then squinting at Lapis right in his eyes. “Ah think the pot may be a mite hot fer that just now.”

“Not for me,” Lapis said. “It’ll take five seconds, nopoly will get hurt, and I promise not to spill a single oat. Please?”

She continued to squint at him for a few moments, then shrugged and stepped back. “Yer call.”

“Thanks,” Lapis said, then he gripped the handle mount, pushed it into position, and shut his eyes. There was a flash of light, accompanied by a burst of warmth on Lapis’ flank and a sudden burst of fatigue that left him slightly weak at the knees.

He opened his eyes, and sure enough, the mount looked as if it had never been broken at all. “Perfect. Alright, I’m done.”

Lapis turned to look at Granny Smith, and found that she was preoccupied with blinking the spots from her eyes. Once she had, she squinted down at the pot, and grunted. “Seems you are. I’ll be impressed if you work out a way to do that fer mah hip.”

Lapis had just opened his mouth to reply when a crack rang out through the square like a gunshot. He whipped around, trying to spot the source, and for a moment he couldn’t see anything wrong. Then, slowly, the giant cauldron full of oatmeal started listing to the side with a deep metallic groan.

Oh shit.

All at once, Lapis was running - toward the cauldron. The large, red pony who had been on the ladder got there first. He snorted and set his jaw, reared up on his back hooves, and *caught* the cauldron, skidding an inch back on the flagstones. His front hooves smoked against the scalding pewter, an acrid scent like burning hair prickling Lapis’ nostrils.

“Can’t... hold it long!” the red pony bellowed, his face strained.

Lapis skidded to a stop beside Red. Behind him, half a dozen other ponies ran toward the pot, more behind them. He shut them out for now, ducked to see what had broken, squinting against the baking roar of the cook-fire, clenching his teeth against the rapid pounding of his pulse. The pot was held up on a ring-shaped metal stand with three scorched wood legs. One leg had snapped, splinters long as nails stabbing out from a length of wood as thick as Lapis' leg. *Wood?! Who the hell-*

Beside Lapis, another pony tried to help hold the cauldron upright. His hoof hissed against the scorching metal, and he pulled away with a yelp. *No time for questions. Fix it. Now!*

Lapis grasped the leg of the stand with his magic, groaned as the heat of the fire slammed against him. He lifted the brace into position, jammed the splintered ends together, and *pushed*.

It might've been his imagination, but the flash of light seemed brighter than usual, and the surge of weakness that shot through his body seemed to leave his knees less steady than before. When Lapis opened his eyes, the stand was as whole as it had ever been. Red must've been able to feel the support - he didn't wait for confirmation before dropping from the side of the pot, sitting on his rump and grimacing as he cradled his front hooves against his chest. His hooves were scorched black around the edges of his metal horseshoes, smoke rising from the char.

“You alright?” Lapis heard someone ask. Red turned, bright-green eyes meeting Lapis’, and Lapis realized dimly that the asking voice was his own.

“E-yup,” Red said, grinning. His voice was deep as a bass guitar, and had the same country twang as Granny Smith’s. “But Ah’d’ve been worse without your help. How’d you find the spare leg for the stand so fast?”

“...I didn’t,” Lapis said. “I fixed the old one. Though, if one leg broke just now, the others might be at the end of their rope too.”

Red nodded, wincing as he set his front hooves back on the ground. “E-yup. There’s some spare posts in the Apple family barn, but Ah think Ah’d better stay here.”

“Then you’ll be staying too, Lapis,” said a voice. Lapis turned to see that Bon Bon had arrived, the Mayor struggling for breath by her side.

“How much... galloping... do you do?” panted the mayor. “But yes... I need volunteers, five ponies, not Lapis, not Big Mac, to go to the Apple barn, grab the posts, brace this thing up.”

Five hooves shot up from the crowd at once, and Big Mac spoke again. “Applebloom, the posts are in the corner by the ladders. You know the one?”

“Well, yeah...” said a high voice. A small, meringue-yellow filly with a comically oversized red bow in her mane stepped out of the crowd, then nodded. “...Ah think so. But Big Mac, Ah can’t just leave you here alone!”

Lapis cocked an eyebrow, then winced as someone - Lyra - spoke directly from his side. *How long has she been there for?*

“Don’t worry, he’s not alone at all,” Lyra said, grinning. “We’re all right here, aren’t we?”

Big Mac chuckled. “E-yup. Ah’ll be fine, Applebloom, Ah promise. Just show these ponies where to get those posts, and hurry on back. Alright?”

Applebloom swallowed, her ears tucking back against her head. Then she nodded. “Alright.” She hesitated for a second, then turned and scampered off toward the edge of town, the volunteer ponies breaking into a trot after her.

As soon as she was out of visual range, Big Mac sighed, then sat back on the flagstones with a thump that Lapis felt more than heard. “Ah’d’ve hated for her to see me get hurt too bad,” he muttered, staring at the flagstones. “Thank you. All of you.”

“Least we can do,” Lapis replied, sitting down more gingerly beside the massive stallion. Lyra and Bon Bon taking a seat to Big Mac’s opposite side.

Big Mac glanced up, looking Lapis over. “Ah don’t think we’ve met before.”

“Well, I only moved in three days ago,” Lapis replied, offering a hoof.
“Lapis Print.”

Big Mac eyed Lapis’ hoof, then raised his own in turn, still black around the horseshoe. “Big Macintosh. But Big Mac’ll do fine.”

They shook hooves - Lapis wasn’t quite sure how, but somehow the feeling was the same as a handshake - then Big Mac turned to look at Lyra and Bon Bon. “And the two of you, Ah’ve seen before.”

“Lyra Heartstrings,” said Lyra, “and this is Bon Bon. I’m a musician, and she-”

“Runs the candy shop on Acorn Route, and *occasionally* manages to introduce herself,” Bon Bon cut in, grinning over at Lyra. “And Lapis here is this year’s repair-pony.”

Lapis blinked. “Wait. This *year*’s?”

Big Mac chuckled. “E-yup. And Ah’m a member of the Apple family.”

“That makes the two of you the busiest pair of ponies in town, huh?” Lyra added.

To Lapis’ surprise, Big Mac shook his head. “Nope. Applejack’s got both of us beat. Speakin’ of, anypony seen her lately?”

Oh. “Uh, she joined in with the rest of the team heading into the Everfree,” Lapis replied. Right on cue, a bestial roar echoed out of the forest, causing a few of the ponies - Lyra among them - to yelp in surprise. About a dozen of them scrambled to their hooves, and a third of those took off, screaming and skittering out of the lights of the town square.

“Wonderful,” Bon Bon muttered, glaring after the runners. “We’d better go catch those fillies once the posts are in place, or they might run into somepony’s window.”

“E-yup.”

Lapis looked around, then cocked an eyebrow. “Speaking of which...”

The five ponies who had left were walking in tandem into the town square, bearing a pile of wood posts atop their backs. Sat on the center of the stack was a grinning Applebloom, who waved at Big Mac as she got closer.

“Ah knew she remembered where those were,” Big Mac said, grinning and standing up. “Ah’ll take things from here. Once this is all over, y’all can come by the Apple farm any time you like - for now, go catch those other ponies.”

“Got it,” Bon Bon said, rising.

“You need a ha- hoof again, just holler,” Lapis added.

Big Mac nodded, then turned and started toward his sister. Lapis smiled as he watched them briefly embrace, then he turned and followed Bon Bon out of the main square, only briefly stumbling as one of his knees jittered.

“Okay,” Bon Bon started, “we’ve got four ponies running off into the town at random. If they could see, they’d probably end up inside their own homes, but since that’s not the case, they’ll be anywhere from ‘almost right’ to ‘the other side of town.’”

“Do we split up to look for them?” Lapis asked.

Bon Bon shook her head. “In this lighting, we’d just get lost too. We need lanterns first - or, well, I need a lantern. The two of you are unicorns, so you should be fine.”

“Yep,” Lyra chirped, and suddenly her horn was glowing the same hue of neon orange as her eyes, bright enough to light up the flagstones beneath her hooves for about five steps.

Lapis blinked in the light, then grimaced. *Okay, I really need to find a beginner's guide to magic somewhere.* “So, let’s say I needed a lantern too...”

Lyra and Bon Bon both turned to look at him.

“...You don’t know a Hornlight spell either?” Bon Bon asked, raising an eyebrow. “Were you raised by griffons or something?”

“Bon Bon!” Lyra said, briefly shooting her friend a look before turning to Lapis. “I didn’t know much magic at all either, until three years ago. I only really needed telekinesis to play the lyre, so learning anything else wasn’t really important. Bon Bon is just used to working with more... versatile unicorns.”

*Gri*ffons? Lapis thought, confused.

Like, the half-lion half-eagle griffons?

Those exist here?

Okay. Sure, why not.

“Every unicorn in Canterlot knows how to cast a Hornlight,” Bon Bon muttered.

Lyra looked up, glancing at the houses around them, her expression surprised. “Wait, we’re in Canterlot? Wow, I never even noticed! Were the houses always so short here?”

Lapis snorted, and Bon Bon chuckled. “Oh, alright, I get it. I’m sorry for the comment, Lapis. There’ll be plenty of lanterns, I’m sure.”

“No harm done,” Lapis replied. “Though, Lyra, I might end up asking you for some guidebook recommendations or something.”

“I can do that,” Lyra said, turning and heading for a nearby alley. “Ooh! Hey, I found some extra lanterns over here!”

Bon Bon cocked her head, frowning. “Extra? What do you mean?”

“See for yourself!” Lyra beckoned them over with a hoof. Lapis and Bon Bon exchanged glances, then trotted over to look.

There, just beyond the entrance to the alleyway, was a disorganized pile of extinguished lanterns. They looked just like the ones in the town square, made from wrought-iron and cloudy yellow glass.

“That’s... odd,” Lapis muttered. “Shouldn’t these be lit already?”

Lyra shrugged. Bon Bon didn’t reply, instead turning to examine the front of the nearest building. She seemed to recognize it, and her face grew grim.

“Oh, they should be more than just lit,” she replied, her voice low. “This is Cantering Boulevard.”

Lyra frowned. “Wait, didn’t the Mayor say to light this street?”

Lapis nodded slowly, then reached out a hoof to touch one of the lanterns. “They’re still hot. These were lit a few minutes ago, tops.”

“Which means,” Bon Bon replied, “that somepony put them all out, and hid them here.”

She looked up, the light of Lyra’s horn casting deep shadows across her face. “Somepony wanted Cantering Boulevard to stay dark.”

“Oh, great. Just what we needed,” Lapis muttered, shutting his eyes. Fear, anger and something *painful* twisted in his stomach, and he felt his mouth twitch. *I just had to think things would be easy, huh? Thanks, Murphy.*

Then a scream echoed from around the corner of the alleyway.

Lapis’ gut wrenched, and he was halfway down the alley before he realized he’d started galloping. He whipped around the corner, looking down a shadowy side street, just in time to see the pegasus waitress from the Corner Cafe scrambling towards him on her back. She didn’t even look at him, she was busy staring into the darkness beyond Lapis’ vision.

Lyra rounded the corner a second later, and the light of her horn showed the faintest glimpse of something indistinct - a tendril, a wisp, maybe a tentacle? - darting out of sight.

“Lapis, catch!” Bon Bon barked, and Lapis looked over just in time to telekinetically snatch a broom handle out of the air. Bon Bon emerged from the alley a second later with a fluffy pink *something* grasped in one of her hooves, spinning the object like a flail too rapidly for Lapis to tell what it was.

“Monster,” the waitress gasped, staring at the space where the tendril had been. “Something long and thin- too dark to see, it felt too soft- it grabbed my hoof, it tried to get me, and-!”

Okay. She's panicking. Nothing too weird here, just handle her like you'd handle Amanda. “Hey. Hey, look at me!” Lapis said, placing a hoof on the pegasus’ shoulder and meeting her gaze. “Look at me. You’re safe now. We’re safe. We’re gonna get you back to the main square, alright? Take a second to catch your breath, and we’ll go. Slow, deep breaths, in through your nose and out through your mouth, can you do that?”

The pegasus nodded, and Lapis smiled. “Good. It’s easy, I promise. In, and out. In... and out. In... out.”

The waitress followed along as best as she could, taking deep, shuddering breaths, and Lapis felt her pulse began to settle under his hoof. “You’re doing great. Take as much time as you need, and then we’ll go.”

“Okay... okay.”

Lapis smiled again, then looked back at where the whatever-it-was had been, holding the broom handle awkwardly at his side, Lyra wrapping the waitress in a hug at once. Bon Bon had stopped spinning the fluffy pink thing, and Lapis could now identify it as a towel wrapped around what looked like a couple of the extra lanterns. He cocked an eyebrow at Bon Bon, and she spared him half a glare before turning back to the wall of darkness outside Lyra’s light.

“Alright, are you ready?” Lyra asked. The waitress nodded, then got back to her hooves, awkwardly shuffling her wings in a way that reminded Lapis of Nikki. *Oh yeah, I wonder if she’s woken up at all yet?*

As they set off back toward the town square, a high-pitched and vaguely-accented squawk echoed from the forest, followed by a faint, reverberating *thud*. Lapis cocked his head. *Did that happen in the show? ...I think that sounded like the sea serpent, maybe? So, I guess that means we’re about two-thirds of the way done. Huh.*

That was fast.

“What was *that*?” asked Lyra.

“Nothing to worry about,” Lapis muttered. “...I mean, whatever it was, it was deep enough inside the Everfree that we don’t need to worry about it. Unless it starts getting closer, or something.”

Bon Bon glared at him, and Lapis blushed. “...Tell you what, I’ll just keep quiet and watch.”

“Please do,” Bon Bon replied.

Lapis nodded, then turned back to watch the shadows behind them. They looked like they were moving, but this wasn’t Lapis’ first rodeo with spookiness - it was his imagination, and he knew it. *Still, it’d be a lot harder to keep calm if I were alone...*

Like Nikki is right now, if she’s awake. A quiet ache of guilt settled into Lapis’ chest, and he sighed. *Yeah, I’ve gotta get away from Bon Bon and Lyra again. Not for too long, just long enough to make sure Nikki’s okay. Can’t have either one of them seeing the inside of my house, though - I told them I had boxes everywhere, but... well, I don’t, and that’ll raise some questions.*

Lapis set his jaw, then resumed his watch, his brow furrowing as he tried to come up with a plan.

When they got back to the square, Bon Bon only slowed down long enough to grab and light the two lanterns she'd taken from the pile. She passed one to Lapis, then surprised him by holding the other in one hoof and walking tripedally down the same street they'd embarked down before.

Lapis watched, cocking an eyebrow, as Bon Bon raised the lantern high in one of her front hooves, then stepped forward with her other front hoof - and somehow, didn't fall over despite having both her front hooves completely off the ground.

...You know what? That's fine. Lapis pointedly lifted his lamp into the air via telekinesis, then carried on.

The street was just about pitch-black, aside from the fiery light of Lyra's horn, and the less-intense light from Bon Bon and Lapis' lanterns. The stars were so dim as to be almost nonexistent, and even the full moon was barely enough to outline most surfaces. The pointed roofs of the Ponyville houses, in this light, suddenly became pointed blotches of pitch-black against the pale spotting of the night sky - they looked, Lapis felt, rather like a row of giant teeth might, if viewed from inside the mouth.

"So where do you think those other three ponies are?" Lapis muttered.

"I don't know," Bon Bon said, "but we need to find them fast. Lyra, do you know any spells to locate them?"

"Not unless they're singing," Lyra sighed. "Lapis, any sp- ...I mean, ideas?"

"Ouch," Lapis muttered, but he took the opportunity. "Well, I've got two. Either we split up to cover more ground, which I don't like, or we get more ponies searching." *And, if there's more ponies searching, that means it'll be harder to notice if I disappear to check on Nikki.*

Bon Bon huffed. "There's no time to organize a formal search party, and besides, that'll just lead to more ponies panicking." She took a deep breath, then sighed. "We're going to head down this road until we're about fifty paces from the edge of town. Once we're there, I'm going to circle around clockwise listening for the sound of anypony panicking. Lapis, Lyra, you two stay together and head counterclockwise."

“Wait, what?” Lapis and Lyra said together.

“I just said that wasn’t a good plan,” Lapis said.

“Bon Bon, what do you think you’re doing?” Lyra added. “It’s just as dangerous for you out there as it is for us!”

“Yes, but in case you haven’t noticed, I can handle it,” Bon Bon replied, turning to stare at them. “We have to split up. It’s the only thing we have time to do, and the two of you will be safer together than either of you would be alone.”

“But what about you, Bon Bon?” Lyra replied, leaning forward, worry plain in how far her ears were folded back. “You’ll be alone! What if the monster comes after you?!”

“If that happens, I’ll yell, and then I’ll kick its tail,” Bon Bon replied, her tone perfectly casual. “And you’ll do the same thing if it comes after you. Got it?”

Oh, this is not happening. “Uh, no, I don’t got it,” he said. “Listen, you and Lyra have been together for a long time. You know each other way better than I know either of you, you’ll have a much better shot at working together if something else happens.”

“And you’ll fare any better by yourself than I will?” Bon Bon asked, cocking an eyebrow.

Bullshitting practice, don’t fail me now. “Maybe not,” Lapis replied, levitating the lantern down by his hip and spinning the broom handle out to his side. “But you’ll definitely fare better *with* somepony than you would without. I’d be willing to bet that you’ve spent more time working as part of a squad than I have, ergo, you’ll do better with somepony by your side than I would. And as for me...” Lapis paused, trying to come up with something that made sense. “Well, I’m the town repair-pony. I fix things. I know how to keep myself together, too. And besides...”

Lapis paused before he got the last words out. *This part might be too much... no, y'know what, she doesn't look convinced yet. Either I say it and maybe look like an idiot, or I don't say it and I lose my chance.*

Despite his reasoning, Lapis still felt his cheeks growing warm under Bon Bon's gaze as he spoke. "...Besides, maybe I actually *was* raised by griffons. And maybe griffons know how to take care of themselves."

Bon Bon's eyebrows shot right up - then, to Lapis' astonishment, she actually seemed to buy it, her ears tucking back as she grimaced and looked awkwardly to the side. Lyra, however, raised her hoof. "Hi, can I talk now? Please?"

Lapis and Bon Bon exchanged looks, then nodded.

"Great! Thanks!" Lyra took a deep breath, then shouted, "NO! No splitting up! Either of you! There's something scary out there, and we all know it, and nopony is going to try and take it on alone!"

Lapis' jaw dropped as Lyra leveled a hoof at Bon Bon. "You first. I don't know *what's* gotten into you tonight, Bon Bon, but whatever it is, you're taking it too far. You're acting like some guardspony captain out of Canterlot, and you're not! You run a *candy shop*, Bon Bon, and I run it with you. I watch you jump up on the counter to get away from spiders - hay, I sweep them outside for you! I'm not about to let you wander off alone just because you decide tonight's the night to live out one of your Tom Prancy novels!"

"And as for you," she said, turning to face Lapis, "you've already put yourself at enough risk for one night! First you run off alone as soon as this 'Twilight' unicorn thinks she has half a plan, then you cast a real, actual Mend-All spell with a wagon-sized pot of oatmeal about to fall on your head, and now this?!" She waved the same accusatory hoof at Lapis, her eyes wide. "I don't know if you've looked at yourself lately, Lapis, but you look about tired enough to drop, raised by griffons or not!"

"No," Lapis muttered, "that's just how my face-"

“Oh, *horseapples* it’s just your face! It’s also your knees, your puffy eyes, and the fact that you’re not casting any magic besides telekinesis.” Lyra pressed a hoof to her barrel. “I know what mana-burn looks like, Lapis. I know what happens if you push it too far. Don’t keep going like this, please, you’ll only hurt yourself!”

Then, finally, Lyra seemed to run out of steam. She sighed, then sat back on the street with a *thump*, her ears tucked back as she staring at the ground between her sticking-out legs. *Even now, she’s sitting like a human*, Lapis thought. ...*And that’s what I notice? Really?*

Lapis exchanged a look with Bon Bon. No words were spoken, but they seemed to reach an agreement regardless, because when Lapis sat down beside Lyra, Bon Bon did the same on her other side. Absently, Lapis tried bending one of his knees, and found that they were almost too weak to bend. *Oh. Guess fixing those pots really did take it out of me.*

Wait. I can just call Nikki from outside of my house.

...Yeah, I’m definitely too tired for this crap.

Bon Bon was first to speak. “Lyra, I... I’m sorry. I was so worried about everypony else in Ponyville that I forgot to stop and think about you and me. I never meant to make you worry about me, Lyra, and I promise I’ll try not to give you anything else to worry about.”

Lyra sniffled, but turned her head and smiled at her friend. Lapis took a deep breath, then said, “...And I’m sorry too. For... well, basically the same thing, plus running myself ragged enough that I might have trouble standing up here in a second.”

Bon Bon looked up sharply at that, but Lapis carried on. “I guess I just got so tired that I started doing stuff without thinking it through first. You’re right, and I’m sorry for not seeing it sooner. I’ll take better care of myself from here on out.”

“We’re all tired,” Lyra giggled, her voice cracking a little. “We’ve stayed up for at least one more hour of night than we were expecting, y’know.”

“Well, I suppose we have,” Bon Bon said, a hesitant grin creeping across her face. “Why don’t we head back to the town square, make sure the

missing ponies have come back, and then see if we can catch some sleep?"

Lyra shook her head, to Lapis' mixed relief and disappointment. "No. We've gotta find those ponies. Celestia only knows what kind of trouble they're in right now."

"Alright," Bon Bon said. "Still, it won't hurt to check the town square first, right?"

Lyra nodded, sniffled again, then stood back up. Lapis stood up soon after, grunting at the effort it took, his legs suddenly burning with the strain of supporting his weight. *Oh. Wow. Okay.*

Bon Bon took notice, glancing back at Lapis. "Hey, you alright?"

"I'm good," Lapis grunted. "Should be able to get back to the town square just fine, but after that I think I had better sit down for-"

He paused, confused, as he felt something soft and light wrap around his back left hoof. Then, suddenly, it pulled, and Lapis barely had time to yelp before he was dragged back into the dark. His vision went black as his head hit the ground, and he knew no more.

"...and unless you can get that cash back to us within a week, we'll have no choice but to involve your parents in the repayment process."

Lapis' head was resting on something hard and warm. Wood, if the knothole jutting into his chin was anything to judge by. His jaw was aching, and a spike of hot pain flared through the back of his head with every heartbeat. Wincing, he opened his eyes, but found that it was too dark to figure out where he was. He tried to think, to remember, but it felt like there was fog in his brain - he could remember waking up, and he remembered who he was, but how he got here was a mystery.

"Wha?" he croaked, picking up his head and trying to stand up - then grimacing as fire shot through his legs, and he fell to all fours. For a second,

he was confused by the echoing knock his hands made as they hit the ground. Then he remembered he had hooves, and that he was a pony, and the fog in his head washed away as Lapis remembered-

It got me, Lapis realized, his blood running cold. *The thing in the shadows.*

“*Do you understand?*” the voice asked again. It was calm, polite, neither cold nor warm. “*Eighty thousand, in full, by the end of the week. Or we'll have to take whatever you have, and your parents will start paying for the rest.*”

Lapis frowned, confused, as a shape took form within the shadows, the darkness around him contracting to reveal he was standing inside his own bedroom.

And sharing the space with him was... a pony, a pale-maroon stallion in a suit, sitting on one of his spare chairs with a briefcase before his legs. His gaze was flat, his eyebrows raised, in an expression that might’ve looked like sympathy if not for the words he’d been saying. “*I know it's hard to accept, but those were the terms you signed. There's nothing you can do,*” he continued. “*If it wasn't what you wanted, you should've thought of that before you accepted the application.*”

Lapis cocked an eyebrow at the apparition. *Wait a minute. Is that...*

His mouth twitched. It trembled. Then, Lapis could contain it no more, and a cold, humorless laugh shuddered its way out of his throat. His knees shivered, then gave way, but Lapis continued to chuckle even as he fell to a seat.

“Excuse me?” he said, glaring at the apparition of Nightmare Moon’s magic, continuing to smile as his head began to grow hot. “I know it’s your shtick to mess with ponies’ heads, but... what?! Of all the things you could’ve picked to scare me with - fire, claustrophobia, spooky noises, *anything* with big teeth - you decided that the scariest thing I can think of is *defaulting on my student loan debt?!*”

Lapis laughed again, even louder than before, and every bit of hysterical stress in him went with it. His gut twisted with fear of the situation he was in, anger at the ridiculousness of it and raw, heart-aching *guilt* for being

able to see something to laugh at in the first place. But he laughed anyway, because the scariest thing this world could throw at him was a unicorn with a tie, and that was just *sad*.

Finally, Lapis cut himself off, and grinned levelly at the pony behind the desk, shutting out the ache in his back legs as he stood. “Well, guess what? You’re right. It is scary, and I’m terrified of it. Which is why I *haven’t stopped working on it since I got here*. I’m going to get back to Earth, and when I do, I’ll be bringing enough diamonds with me to deflate the jewelry market. You think there’s nothing I can do? Well, I hate to break it to you, you big cloud of smoke, but there is, and I’m already doing it!” He pointed at the door. “Get the hell out of my house. Or else, I’ll grab a blanket and waft you out—”

“NOOOOOOOOOO!” echoed a distant scream from outside, and the next second, a burst of light brighter than the sun flashed through Lapis’ window. It washed directly over Lapis, and he felt the weakness in his legs fade just a little, his Cutie Mark briefly pulsing with warmth against his flank.

Then, the light faded, and Lapis opened his eyes to see that he was alone in the room. The pony with the briefcase had vanished, and in its place was a small, inky blotch of black fog, pooled and writhing on the floor but otherwise immobile.

Lapis took a deep breath, then stepped around the whatever-it-was on the floor and headed for his front door. *Was that the Elements just now? Had to be. Then... sunrise should be coming in around thirty seconds or so.* He’d done it. He’d survived the night, he was home free. Where was Nikki?

Something behind him hissed, long and slow as steam from a leaky pipe.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” Lapis muttered, spinning to face behind himself. “What now—”

The words died in his throat as he saw what was coalescing in his bedroom. The knot of smoke had risen from the floor, and more and more blotches of it were pouring through the window, rushing down from the Everfree and inside Ponyville alleyways, melding with the spherical cloud of shadow right in front of Lapis. As he watched, a slit formed in the shadow, opening to reveal a vertical, blue-green, slit-pupiled eye.

“Nikki, get help!” Lapis had time to yell. Before he could do anything else, the eye of the cloud snapped shut, and a tendril of vapor darted toward his face. It wormed its way into Lapis’ nose, and he made the mistake of gasping, allowing more of the stuff to pour into his mouth. He stumbled back, away from the body of the shadow and into the front room of his shop, then froze as he felt his fear suddenly vanish, snuffed out and replaced by cold anger.

Lapis hesitated, then kicked out at the smoke, realizing that the weakness in his legs was gone entirely. The shadow recoiled, pulling itself back and curling into a corner, shrinking as Lapis gritted his teeth and glared at it. *I feel... good*, he realized. Better than ‘good,’ he felt wide awake, his mind as clear and sharp as ice as he stared down at the latest source of his frustration, the shakiness in his legs replaced by a cold, perfect steadiness, an odd blue-green tint coloring the edges of his vision. *I could kill that thing myself. I feel like I could grab enough gold and gems to buy an island or two back on Earth... or maybe enough to put my loan company out of business. And why shouldn’t I?*

A sudden flapping of wings echoed through the air, and Nikki landed on Lapis’ back, her wing snapping out to slap clean through a tendril of shadow that had been curling up his neck, around the side of his jaw. Lapis coughed, smoke washing out of his mouth and nose, and suddenly the coldness was gone, the tint fading from his vision as his aches and pains returned with a throbbing heat. *Wait, what the hell was that?!*

The shadow in the corner hissed, shooting another tendril down Lapis’ throat, and he felt his legs growing cold again. Nikki squawked a warning, but Lapis was already moving, wrapping a hoof around the tendril and pulling it from his mouth himself, his foreleg trembling with the effort. The

shadow hissed again, trying to lunge forward, but Lapis just barely held it off, something occurring to him as he held the parasite back.

“I don’t care,” he said, his voice strained, “how much power... you’d give me. I think I know what you did to Nightmare Moon, and I will *never* bring you back home.”

The shadow screeched, then wrenched its tendril free of Lapis’ grip. Lapis heard the door to his shop opening behind him, then the whatever-it-was twisted like a pony, bucking him right in the barrel. Lapis braced, expecting to crash into the wall-

“Lapis!” shouted a voice, and suddenly a feeling like warm water engulfed him, washing over his body for just a moment before he dropped to the floor, unharmed. A second later, Lyra was standing next to him, glaring at the shadowy thing in his living room, pawing the ground like she was about to charge, the orange glow of her horn ominously bright.

“Lyra?” Lapis said, but then a cream-yellow blur crashed through Lapis’ window, tackling the shadow to the ground in a spray of broken glass. It hissed and screeched, twisting into the shape of a pony as it grappled with a snorting, straining Bon Bon.

Golden sunlight flooded the room, and the shadow screamed like tearing metal as smoke began to pour off its body. It slipped away like a liquid, Bon Bon yelping as her hooves suddenly curled shut around thin air, and darted toward the hallway-

-oh no you don’t-

-thumping to a stop against the floor as Lapis grabbed it by the tail. It turned to look back at him, its single slit-pupiled eye glancing between Lapis and the sun, then it grew wings and flew toward the hallway, Lapis yelling as it dragged him behind, spreading his legs as he was dragged toward the doorway. His hooves hit the doorframe with two solid *thunks*, and Lapis groaned as his legs began to burn from the strain of holding the nightmare at bay, his shivering knees slowly bending-

“I can’t... hold it!” he said, and for a heartbeat, he was alone, his legs failing beneath him as he crumpled toward the darkness.

And suddenly Bon Bon and Lyra were next to him, grabbing the shadow and pulling it back from the hallway, Lapis finally getting a chance to breathe as he slowly, shudderingly straightened his shaking legs. Even Nikki pitched in, grabbing a wisp of the thing in her claws and flying toward the window, straining as her wings beat with all their strength.

“Together!” Lyra said, her voice clear. “Out the window, on three! One, two, *three!*”

They heaved, Lapis screaming as he put everything he had into pulling the nightmare into the light, and the shadow screeched in terror as it shot backward over their heads into the sunlight. Lapis fell backward in a daze, watching dimly as the shadow flew out the window and dissolved into wisps of steam, vanishing with a final hiss like water on a stovetop.

For a second, it was all that Lapis could do to lie there and keep from passing out. Then, slowly, he rolled back onto his legs, straining as he stood back up, Bon Bon ducking to wrap one of his forelegs over her shoulder. “Easy,” she said. “Take it slow. You did good work.”

“Thanks,” Lapis mumbled. “You alright?”

“Peachy. Lyra?”

“I’m good!” Lyra panted, waving up from the floor, her voice exhausted. “Just... gimme a second. Might’ve... *kinda* forgotten to breathe there. Oh, look, the sun’s up, thank Celestia.”

Bon Bon quickly turned to look her over, then nodded. “You’re fine. Alrighty then, so, Lapis?”

Lapis was just awake enough to feel a prickle of unease at the tone of Bon Bon’s voice. “Uh-huh?”

Bon Bon began slowly leading him to the table and the pair of chairs by the broken window of his shop, where he'd been reading the *Reference Guide* only a few hours earlier. "After you disappeared," Bon Bon said, "Lyra spent ten minutes telling me all about a little something called mana-burn. You know what that means for you?"

"I get the feeling I'm not going to like it," Lapis muttered.

"It means," Bon Bon said, brushing off one of his chairs and pushing him firmly onto it, "that you are going to sit in this chair, and you are going to stay there until you're ready to go to sleep, and you will do absolutely nothing else otherwise. Is that clear?"

"Whoa, hold up-"

"I said, *is that clear*, Lapis Print?"

"Okay, I get it, Mom," Lapis said, raising his free hoof in surrender. "Stay put until naptime. No problem. Just... tell me you found those other ponies, please."

"Yep, we did," Lyra said, getting back to her hooves and taking a deep breath. "By the time we had to stop looking for you, they'd all found their way back to the town square. Whatever those smoke-things that Nightmare Moon sent out were, they didn't seem interested in actually hurting anypony. Just... keeping them scared and in the dark."

"Except for that last one," Bon Bon said. "That one... it just felt different. Like Nightmare Moon, but less... directed, more wild. Lapis, what happened to you?"

"Not a lot," Lapis muttered. "The one that grabbed me knocked me out, and after that it must've dragged me here, because this is where I woke up. It tried to show me my worst fear, but... well, that didn't work. Then the Elements of Harmony went off, and-"

"Wait, that flash of light were those Elements of Harmony thingies?" Lyra asked. "How do you know?"

Lapis hesitated. “Well... I mean, the sun’s up, so it kinda had to be.”

Lyra nodded, but her ears tucked back a little, and Bon Bon fixed him with a pointed, unmoving stare. Lapis felt his ears try to fold back, grimaced, and consciously flicked them back upright before he carried on. “After the Elements went off, something was... different. Before, that thing was the same sparkly-purple smoke as Nightmare Moon’s mane, but... well, you saw how dark it was.”

“Lapis,” Lyra cut in again. “I... I know you’ve been through a lot, and I totally understand if now’s not a good time, but... you knew something about Nightmare Moon, didn’t you?”

Lapis froze. *Uh-oh.* He was in no state to run, and judging by the look on Bon Bon’s face, she might actually tackle him to the floor if he tried to leave. Nikki didn’t look like she’d be any help, either - she was perched on the table beside them, looking up at Lapis with wide-eyed, worried interest. *This... might actually be it.*

Lapis sighed, his ears folding back, and this time he didn’t bother to flick them up as he stared down at the table. “What gave it away?” he muttered.

“Whenever Nightmare Moon laughed, you always got this strange look on your face,” Lyra said. “And... well, it seems like you already knew about the Elements of Harmony.”

Lapis took a slow, deep breath, trying to buy himself some time to think. *I mean, I could tell them everything, but they’d never believe it. And even if they did, that’d be worse - I’d end up disrupting the entire show, and then any edge I might have is gone.*

“The Elements,” Lapis began slowly, “I knew about from a book I’d picked up this- well, I guess it’d be yesterday morning, now. It’s the same book I was reading in the Town Hall, before Nightmare Moon arrived. I read that the Princesses had used them to fix some other big problems, and I was hoping that maybe... maybe somepony with a little more talent than me could find them, and use them to take care of Nightmare Moon. So, when I heard the Princess’ student say she was heading to the library, I galloped

over there and got the book into her hooves as quickly as I could. After that... well, you know everything else I said about the Elements.”

“But what about you and Nightmare Moon?” Lyra said. “Lapis, I don’t know what you felt whenever that pony laughed, but the reason we knew where to start looking for you in the first place was because... we heard you laughing, and... and it...”

“It sounded almost exactly like her laughter did,” Bon Bon finished. Lyra’s ears folded back as she looked away in shame, but she nodded. That familiar mix of emotions twisted in Lapis’ gut again, and he grimaced. *Y’know, I almost wish you were grilling me on the Elements, instead.*

“I... never knew Nightmare Moon,” he admitted. “Last night was the first time I’d ever laid eyes on her, and I’ll be glad if it was the last. But-” Lapis grimaced, his throat trying to close around his next words. He swallowed, then tried again. “Her laugh meant something, and I knew what it was. I recognized it, because- because I’ve meant it myself. I’ve meant it before, and I meant it just now.

“It scares me to say this, but, well, I think Nightmare Moon and I have something in common. And... well, I think whatever took control of Princess Luna, the pony who used to be Nightmare Moon, thought so too. Because it was trying to do the same thing to me, when you and Lyra helped me throw it into the sunlight.”

“So, the Nightmare has been returned to its realm after all?” said a new voice. “That’s quite the relief. Well done, my little ponies.”

The chair opposite Lapis scraped, and Lapis looked up to see that Bon Bon had gotten out of it and sunk into a low bow facing the window. He saw Lyra scrambling to do the same as he turned to look out the shattered window.

Advancing toward them was... well, she was shaped like someone had taken a pony about Lapis’ size, given them proportions and facial features a little closer to those of a real horse, and then made them twice the usual size. Maybe three times. She had a pure-white coat, almost painfully bright to look at, and her mane and tail were shimmering, psychedelic blurs of

greens, purples and pinks that reminded Lapis of *Aurora Borealis*, floating and waving as if moved by a constant invisible breeze. Her Cutie Mark, partially covered by the tip of her folded wing, was an ornate, golden representation of the sun, and perched atop her long, spiraling horn was a simple, jeweled crown.

Lapis felt the rush of adrenaline in his veins, and quickly took a bow himself, almost falling on his face as he got out of his chair. “Your Grace,” he said. *Princess Celestia. No way it could be anyone else.*

He heard her chuckle. “Goodness, I haven’t heard that one in a while. You may rise, all of you.”

Lapis rose, and found that the Princess was looking directly at him with a regal, amused smile. The Mayor was standing awkwardly at her side, glancing at the ground as if trying to pick the best spot to kneel on.

“So, I understand the three of you have had a busy Summer Sun Celebration Eve?” asked Princess Celestia, her smile the gentle warmth of a sunbeam, her gaze seeming to look directly into Lapis’ soul.

“Uh, certainly not busier than yours, Your Grace,” Lapis replied. “Lyra and Bon Bon here caught the worst of it, though - I was unconscious for a good part of it, so at least I managed to catch some rest.”

“Says the pony who’s been pulling Mend-All spells out of his *rump* all day long!” Lyra said, shooting Lapis a sudden stern look. She blinked, then grew pale as she remembered that Princess Celestia was there, her ears flattening back against his head. “Um... pardon my French, Your Highness.”

“I’ve heard worse,” the Princess chuckled. “Although... multiple Mend-All spells? That’s quite impressive, Mister...”

Uh-oh, Lapis thought as Celestia waited for his name. “Uh, it’s Print, Your Grace. Lapis Print. And fixing things is just my special talent, I learned it at

about the same time as telekinesis. But Bon Bon here, well, she runs a candy shop normally, but tonight she did at least a third of the work to keep this town running. And Lyra here did a better job keeping everypony calm than either of us could've. Not to mention Nikki over there—" Nikki cooed in surprise at being mentioned, but otherwise kept still- "who's probably as much a reason as everypony else in this building that the, uh, Nightmare is gone now."

"I see," Princess Celestia replied, nodding thoughtfully. "Well, I think the four of you have done Ponyville, and Equestria, a great service by dealing with the creature that had possessed my sister. I had suspected it would search for another pony to latch onto, somepony who had a lot to lose, and greatly feared losing it - desperately enough, perhaps, to accept help from anypony or anything that offered it. That, I think, is what you have in common with Princess Luna."

"Oh." Lapis felt his ears flicking back. "You heard that, huh?"

Princess Celestia nodded, not a trace of anger in her expression. "We may be royalty, but that doesn't make us quite so different from other ponies. Don't think we would be offended that you see some part of yourself in us, nor that we might begrudge your standing together where my sister fell alone."

She paused, her ear twitching as if she were listening to something, then spoke again. "You may know that, long ago, Princess Luna ruled over the night as I govern the day, and that she moved the moon as I do the sun. What you may *not* know is that, as I protect Equestria's citizens from the worries of the waking world, she guarded them from the dangers of their dreams.

"However, her burden was heavy indeed, and as time wore on, she began to worry she might be unable to protect her little ponies. Then, a creature came forth from a place of darkness and fear, and showed her a vision of the very thing she sought to prevent - all her subjects paralyzed by terror, tormented by the things they couldn't face alone. It told her that this vision was the future, and offered her its power to aid in stopping it. But I suspect you know the cost of the Nightmare's aid."

“My sister fell,” Princess Celestia said, “because she tried to face her darkest fears alone, and lost herself to obsessing over their prevention at any cost. You, Lapis Print, chose to turn to the ponies around you instead of facing your problems alone, and that is why the Nightmare couldn’t claim you. It’s a lesson that many ponies must endure in their lives, one that Princess Luna congratulates you- or *would* congratulate you for learning, were she here.”

“And she’s alright now? Princess Luna, I mean?” Lapis asked.

Princess Celestia blinked, her eyes briefly widening by the barest sliver of an inch. Then she nodded, her warm smile returning to her face as she giggled. “She’s quite alright, yes. The Elements were able to free her from the Nightmare’s grasp, and I imagine she’ll make a quicker recovery than even she expects.”

Lapis sighed in relief, a knot he hadn’t realized was in his gut twisting loose. “Good. Nob- uh, *nopony* should have to deal with the Nightmare at all, let alone for as long as she must have.” He blinked, then blanched as he realized what he’d said.

“And *nopony* will need to fear its return again,” Princess Celestia said, her voice firm but still friendly, a forgiving smile gracing her expression. “Now, much as I would like to stay for the rest of the Summer Sun Celebration, the rest of Equestria is yet unsure of what brought about the events of last night. As such, I must depart for Cloudsdale-”

A sudden crunch from off to the side interrupted the Princess, and she glanced to the side, then chuckled. “Or perhaps Manehattan, as it seems Cloudsdale may already be informed.”

Lapis glanced over, then saw Derpy Hooves emerging from the wreckage of a wagon full of hay, rubbing her head with a hoof as she stretched her wings. She looked exhausted - parts of her mane were sticking out, and her eyelids were sagging so low it was a wonder she could see at all - but the grin on her face was nothing short of triumphant.

“Huh,” Lapis heard Bon Bon mutter, her voice low. “She made it.”

“Of course she did... Uh, thanks, Your Grace. For explaining everything, I mean,” Lapis said, quickly taking another bow.

Again, Princess Celestia chuckled. “Not at all, Lapis Print. I look forward to seeing you again.” Her horn came aglow with golden light, and the shards of Lapis’ window lifted off the floor of his workshop, gently whistling back into place inside their frame - then, with a flash of light and a crackle like bubble wrap, Lapis’ window was as whole as it had ever been, and the Princess’ blurred form was walking away on the other side.

“Wow,” Lyra breathed. “That was... the fastest Mend-All spell I’ve ever seen!”

“No kidding,” Lapis said, his voice hushed. *Is... that what it looks like when I do it? No, fixing this up would’ve taken me at least three hours, and she just did it... all at once. In less than five seconds.*

Wow. No wonder she’s royalty.

Lapis tried to imagine what the process of what fixing the window would’ve been like for him, and was instantly rewarded with a throbbing headache. He winced, and Bon Bon took notice. “And speaking of ponies who need to recuperate...”

“Yeah, some bed rest sounds pretty good right now,” Lapis replied, wincing and raising a hoof to his head. “You guys better get some sleep too, I’m sure you’re just as bad as I am.”

“We’re getting you home first,” Lyra said, rising to her hooves with a yawn. “Where is your house, anyway?”

“This is it,” Lapis muttered, stifling a yawn of his own, rising from his feet and gesturing toward the hallway. “Seriously, my bedroom is just back there, I can walk fifteen steps to get there just fine.”

“Oh,” Lyra replied. “Huh. Well, it’s really nice! I love the window!”

“Yeah, me too, that’s why I put the table and chairs there,” Lapis said.

Bon Bon blushed. “Well... I’m glad the Princess fixed it, then.”

“You did what you had to do, and besides, I would’ve repaired it in like, a day,” Lapis yawned, waving a dismissive hoof. “Anyway, uh... thanks. Like, for real, you saved my sorry rump. I don’t have a clue how I’m going to pay you back.”

“Start by getting some bed rest,” Bon Bon said. “And maybe follow it up by letting us help you unpack... where is all your stuff, anyway?”

“Don’t have any,” Lapis muttered, scrubbing one of his eyes. *God, I’m about to drop, huh?* “Kinda moved here in a hurry. Working on it.”

“Ooooh,” Lyra said, nodding as if she’d just realized something. Lapis frowned over at her, but he was too tired to really care about what was going on. “Well... I guess we’ll let you get some sleep, then. C’mon, Bon Bon, we’re tired too, let’s go!”

“Wha-” Bon Bon began, but Lyra was already pushing her out the door. “See you around, Lapis!”

“See you,” Lapis replied, waving as Lyra shut the door. He yawned again as Nikki flew over onto his back, turning and heading for his bedroom.
Wonder what that was about. ...Eh.

Lapis flopped onto his bed with all the grace of a fish on land, too tired even to pull the blankets over himself as he rolled onto his back, Nikki perching on his sidetable. He glanced at the pigeon, and a twinge of guilt plucked at his chest.

“Hey, thank you too,” Lapis said, looking over at Nikki. “I’m sorry I just kinda... left you in here, through almost all of last night. You saved me from that thing at least twice today, and I’m gonna pay you back. Tomorrow, I’m getting you a bag of birdseed bigger than I am.”

Nikki smirked, making an aw-shucks sort of gesture with her wing, then yawned and nestled down on the nightstand. Lapis grinned, rolling his eyes, then settled back into bed. *Finally. I can rest for a while. I don't need to worry about the protagonists, or the script, or getting the attention of any important ponies...*
...like the Princess...
...wait, did she say she "looked forward to seeing me again?!"

Lapis sat bolt upright, his eyes snapping open. “Shit. Shit, shit, shit, shit!”

Something light and fluffy smacked against his front hoof with a whap. Lapis looked down, surprised, and saw Nikki glaring up at him with one open eye, folding the wing she'd just slapped him with. She pointed back toward his pillow with one wing, then pointedly shut her eyes and went back to sleep.

“...Tomorrow,” Lapis agreed. He nodded, leaning back, and was out before he hit the pillow.

Princess Celestia was sitting at her writing desk, calmly composing a set of letters - one for every small town and village in Equestria. She'd already visited all the larger cities personally, and would make appointments to visit the remaining towns over the course of the next week. It would add quite the delay to the tax reform she'd been planning, of course, but some things were more important.

For example, her dear sister, Princess Luna. She was sitting on a cushion by the window, staring out at the towering skyline of Canterlot with a queer look of melancholy on her face. Her eyes traced the peaks and points of the unfamiliar towers and rooftops, and yet she barely even seemed to see them.

“Sister,” she asked, her voice barely above a whisper. “How can we... ever hope to take up the burden of dreams again, now that we have failed so drastically?”

“Whatever do you mean?” Princess Celestia asked, looking up from her writing.

“Our... no, thy little ponies,” Luna said, still staring out the window. “The only princess they have ever known is thee, Sister. Our name is all but forgotten, overwritten by the monster’s title we earned by our shortsightedness. Our duties are assumed null, our moon moved by your horn, our evening sky feared more than e’er before. How...” She placed a hoof against the glass of the window, staring at her own uncertain expression. “How can we pretend such a right to their trust, as to tread into their dreams again? How can we hope to help thy ponies stand against their fears, when we ourselves could not withstand our own?”

Celestia set her quill aside. “My dear Luna, do you remember why you took up the duty of facing dreams?”

“We do, Sister,” Luna replied, looking over at Celestia again. “Your nightmares have not returned?”

“No,” Princess Celestia replied, smiling. “They have not. Not only because of your help in confronting my own Nightmares, but because you guided me to seek out aid. You saw the Mayor of Ponyville, didn’t you?”

Luna didn’t chuckle, but a smile flickered briefly on her face. “We did, yes. She seemed... not what we expected thee to approve of in the office of a Mayor.”

“No, she is not,” Celestia replied. “And yet Ponyville failed to reduce itself to rubble in the absence of my guiding hooves. Do you think I would’ve believed such a thing was possible, if you hadn’t taught me to share my responsibility in the first place?”

“Perhaps not,” Princess Luna said, a frown slowly dawning on her brow. “Sister, if you are suggesting we delegate our duties... we fear the books that teach our arts crumbled to mold centuries ago.”

“Then perhaps you should take students,” Princess Celestia replied. “I have done much the same. I can’t say all of my students were successful, but

many are. My current protege, for example, is quite promising.”

“She who used the Elements of Harmony upon us,” Princess Luna replied.
“We are acquainted, yes. Dost thou mean to... someday...”

Princess Celestia paused, staring into the distance. “Perhaps,” she whispered. “Someday. But for now, I am content to help her learn at her own pace, and to force no more responsibility upon her than what she seeks out herself. I find that she takes quite enough.”

Luna nodded. “We... we fear, sister, that thy ponies would not learn from us. That they would hear our name, and see only the monster that sought to take them from thee, and to take the daylight from themselves.”

She sniffled, blinking rapidly as she looked down at her own hooves. “We fear... that we have earned nothing less than their fear. Their hatred. And that... that to seek to restore their trust would be an act more monstrous yet. That exposing them once to the danger we represent unknowingly may be partially excused by our ignorance, but that to take them into our hooves again, with full knowledge of the atrocities we are capable of committing...”

Her voice caught briefly, and Celestia rose from her desk, walking to sit beside her sister and folding her own wing across Luna’s back.

“You won’t need to restore my trust in you, Luna,” she said. “You never lost it. Not for a moment.”

Luna sniffed again. She coughed. Then, slowly, she broke down sobbing at last, turning to embrace Celestia, her dark wing unfolding around Celestia’s back as she buried her face in Celestia’s barrel.

“We... missed you so, Sister,” Luna choked out.

“And we missed you,” Celestia replied, feeling her own vision blur as she shut her eyes.

From atop the writing desk, a set of fifty letters awaited Princess Celestia’s attention, each a village full of a hundred ponies or more who revered her as a goddess. From beneath them sat a tangle of specifications, guidelines, and

stipulations as tangled as a thicket of thorns, which her country would need her to untangle before the next recession, and not far outside these doors a dozen nobles or more were demanding an explanation for the unexpected delay in the sunrise.

They could wait. They would still be there tomorrow, she was sure of it.

Today, Celestia had her sister back.

Today, Luna had come home.

Author's Notes:

Three things about the actual content so far:

First off, the chapter naming is deliberate. And no, I'm not going to change it.

Second: yeah, this chapter is why I included the "oh-by-the-way-I-might-be-biased-about-edginess" warning. Though, I might just not be clear on my terminology - is this technically angst? Grunge? Emo? I'm not sure, what's the word for "featuring characters who have poor mental health without including gratuitous violence/perversion in overzealous detail, or portraying constant anger at everyone and everything in the universe as a livable default state of existence?"

Third: if you've gotten to this point by now, hopefully you've decided there's a *slight* chance I care about at least some of the characters that aren't Blue McFixyhorn. That's because this is in fact the impression I'm trying to give off. Here, I've memorized some random trivia to prove it:

- Bon Bon, or should I say Sweetie Drops, is canonically a secret agent for a monster-hunting organization run out of Canterlot, living a double identity in Ponyville. I'm bringing this up now because, while it explains most of her behavior, she doesn't tell Lyra about it until, like, season five or something. It's therefore very unlikely that Lapis will

get told about it anytime soon, which makes it equally unlikely that the readers would otherwise find out.

- With the exception of two scenes involving Pinkie Pie, every line spoken by the Mane 6 is exactly as written in the episodes of the show. This involved more pausing and rewinding than I'm proud to admit.

- The "Nightmare" creature that was parasitically attached to Princess Luna to create Nightmare Moon is... kinda canon? Depends on whether you want to count the IDW comics or not, which is totally up to you - I'm just using them as inspiration. Anyway, preying on your worst fears is in fact something they do in those comics, so I looked at that and thought, "Huh. Maybe Luna didn't become Nightmare Moon out of envy. Maybe... ruthless desperation to protect ponies from fear. Maybe she was tricked into believing that the only way she could truly win against the Nightmares was by forcing ponies to face their fears, alone, continually, until they overcame them. Because that's what she did, right? She faced her fears alone and won, right? And that's why she's stronger now, right?"

- Derpy Hooves. I spent a good hour or so reading into the details of the Derpy-Hooves vs. Ditz-Doo name debate, and eventually just decided to stick with calling her Derpy Hooves. This is because it is now the year 2022, and the cringe that therefore results from anything involving the word "derp" should hopefully distract readers from the fact that I couldn't find out whether Derpy actually has family in Cloudsdale, and I just liked her enough to give her an in-chapter subplot.

Also, a brief introduction to the OCs (besides Lapis):

- Hot Cocoa, the pegasus waitress from the Corner Cafe. She makes a killer mocha if you like whipped cream, and she'll give you a funny look if you don't. When her friends ask her for "the good stuff," she adds cinnamon and a just a pinch of chili powder.

- Yellow Petal, the flower seed salespony from Canterlot Boulevard. She came up with the snack bags herself, which sold better during the

Celebration than all of her big bags combined. She's very proud, and is looking to expand into larger bags next year.

- Nikki the pigeon. She's a normal Ponyville pigeon, who took an interest in Lapis the first time she saw him fixing a roof. Lapis attempted to name her directly after Nikola Tesla (as he didn't know the exact details of good ol' Nick's pigeon obsession), and got himself slapped for his trouble. Later, Nikki helped Lapis find the secret tinkering workshop in his basement, but we'll get into the details of that one next time - but that's why Lapis bought her the bag of birdseed during the opening scene.

Hoki, that's all I've got time for in this note. Thanks for reading, and I'll see you in the next one!

Episode III: The Griffon, Brushed Off

It was Lapis Print's first day on the job, and he still wasn't sure he was used to being a pony.

For one thing, when he'd woken up that morning, he'd fallen off the bed after trying to grab his bedpost with fingertips he no longer possessed. For another, he'd put a dent in his only cutting board after getting a little too enthusiastic chopping some mushrooms for his omelet via magic. The sound of his hooves clip-clopping on his wood floor was as jarring as firecrackers going off, and he still wasn't sure why he had a gray streak in his mane - he was barely twenty, that hair color had no business on his head.

Still, he had to eat, and that meant he had to buy food. And that meant he had work to do. So, he pulled the three requests he'd gotten so far off his notice board, tucked them into his saddlebags, and was just about to leave when he glanced at the closet door.

His eyes narrowed. It was strange, but for some reason, the closet behind the counter just felt... off, somehow. Lapis wanted to give it a more thorough investigation, but he had jobs to do.

Lapis nodded, taking a deep breath and turning to face the front door. "Right. Jobs now, ominous closet later." Then, he pushed the door open, and stepped into his first day of work in Ponyville...

...Lapis arrived back at his shop with Nikki on his shoulder. She flew in as soon as he opened the shop door, much to his surprise, then settled down on Lapis' counter. He'd been expecting her to head for the hills after he'd fixed that first thatched roof, but for some reason she'd stuck around.

“So, what brings you here?” Lapis asked the pigeon.

Nikki shrugged in response, and Lapis was left with no way of continuing the conversation - so, he trotted over to the notice board, checked it for new jobs and found it empty, then cast a wary look at the closet door. He needed to restock the basket of slips, but...

Slowly, Lapis pushed the door open. The room beyond was, plain and simple, a closet. There wasn't anything special about it - it was square, it had shelves, and on the wall to his right it had a tool rack. Lapis looked around, trying to figure out what it was about the closet that made him suspicious - but for the life of him, he just couldn't put his finger on it.

Then again, he thought, it's hard to put a finger on anything, lately.

He rolled his eyes, then levitated a sheaf of notices out of one of the boxes, stepping out of the closet as Nikki flew inside past him. “Careful in there,” he called over his shoulder as he made his way out the front door.

When he re-entered the shop a second later, it was to see Nikki emerging from the closet - on foot, this time. She looked right up at him and let out an urgent coo.

“What is it?” Lapis asked. “You notice anything?”

Nikki nodded. She walked to the corner of the space behind the counter, then walked along the wall that the closet shared with the main room, taking a quick, pattering series of steps along the long edge of the rectangular space. Then, she turned and flew into the closet, where she walked along the same wall from the other side.

Lapis raised an eyebrow. “What... are you doing?”

Nikki rolled her eyes, then flew back out of the closet and repeated the process. This time, she went more slowly, glancing back at Lapis as if expecting to see comprehension on his face. She finished walking the length of the closet wall, then turned and gave him a distinct “are-you-stupid” look, one that Lapis had previously thought was unique to people and cats.

“...Yeah, I’ve still got nothing,” Lapis said.

Nikki scowled, then took off, her wing smacking into Lapis’ muzzle as she flew past his face. She landed at the corner of the main room’s wall again, and stomped her way slowly and deliberately down the length of the wall. Her scaled feet made tiny, regular clicks as they came down, distinct enough that Lapis could count the steps - which he did, if only because he couldn’t think of anything else to do. Ninety-six steps, of about an inch long.

Then, Nikki flew back to the closet-side of the wall and clicked her way down its length. One-two-three-four-five-six... all the way up to...

“Sixty?” Lapis muttered. But... she’d gotten to ninety-six on the counter’s side of the wall. He walked up to the doorframe, looking at the rectangular space behind the counter, and then at the square floorspace of the closet. Rectangle... square. Rectangle... square. Then the penny dropped.

“This closet... is smaller than it should be,” Lapis muttered, and he turned to regard the wall with the tool rack.

“There’s something behind that wall, isn’t there?”

Under what some residents would tentatively describe as “normal circumstances,” Ponyville’s streets were pretty tidy. Sure, most of them were either made of dirt or of dirty flagstone, but you weren’t likely to trip over anything unless you dropped it in front of yourself. And even then, somepony else would usually stick out a hoof to stop you from falling on your face.

It was decidedly abnormal, Lapis knew, to have so much pottery on the ground that every other step was met by the musical crunch of breaking clay. It was also decidedly abnormal to have a herd of *rabbits* rampaging through town, devouring every flowerbed, rosebush, and potted plant in their path. And yet here he was, staring down the street just outside his shop, his mouth wide open as he gawked at the aftermath of the most damaging disaster to hit Ponyville in a decade: Hurricane Bunny. Courtesy,

or so he heard, of one Applejack Apple - friend to Twilight Sparkle, and bearer of an Element of Harmony.

Which meant that all would be forgiven, no fines would be leveled, and no help in cleaning up would be expected. That left the duty of picking up the pieces to the citizens of Ponyville - and sure enough, a few ponies were already sweeping portions of the street in front of their house, but most were still staring forlornly at what remained of their gardens. Lapis hadn't thought to plant anything, so his property had mostly been spared; even still, the bottom of his doorframe had been gnawed into a pile of splinters, and tiny, dusty footprints covered his doormat.

Lapis sighed, then lit his horn, picking up the largest pieces of his doorframe and putting them back into place one at a time, each piece joining with the rest in a small, bright flash of light. *Maybe I should install a fence, or something?* He snorted, smirking. *Nah, that'd just be one more thing to chew up. I wonder if they've invented animal-repellant spray here? ... No, it'd probably scare off Nikki, too. Huh. Looks like the bunnies actually ate some of the doorframe. If I want to make it look nice again, I'll end up needing some sawdust and wood glue.*

Lapis paused, cocking his head as a disturbing thought occurred to him. *Wait. Isn't glue made from...?*

Okay, yeah, let's maybe just never mention glue ever again. Just in case. He shivered, then turned around.

Lapis froze in place, his eyes widening as he took in the small crowd that had gathered behind him while he was working. A good ten or twenty of the town's pastel ponies were standing behind him, peering over each others' shoulders, the ponies in front straining to keep a respectful distance as those behind struggled to get a good look. All of them seemed to be unicorns, and as he turned to look, they all froze in place, their eyes widening as they glanced back and forth between Lapis and each other.

For a single, bizarre second, Lapis thought they'd somehow heard him thinking about glue, and his heart skipped a beat before he remembered that wasn't possible. Then, one of the ponies - a green-coated stallion with a

sack of dirt for a Cutie Mark - raised a hoof. "Um, excuse me, but... were those Mend-All spells you were just using?"

Oh, it's this again. Lapis sighed, took a deep breath, and flicked his ears back upright. "Yeah, those were Mend-All spells. My name's Lapis Print, I'm Ponyville's new repair-pony, and I've always had a special talent for Mend-Alls." Lapis had given this speech a few dozen times already - while he hadn't had enough time to actually read the book on Mend-All spells he'd "loaned" from the Golden Oak, the reactions of the unicorns who saw him in action were starting to give him the impression that, whatever Mend-Alls were, they were a big deal.

The stallion who'd spoken nodded, a smile returning to his face. "Are you taking orders right now?"

"Yep." Lapis gestured to the corkboard on the front wall of his shop. "Anything that's broken, as long as you've still got all the pieces. Write your name, address, and what item needs fixed on one of those slips, then tack it to the corkboard and I'll get around to it as soon as I can."

"Thanks!" the stallion said. He turned toward the corkboard and started toward it at a casual walk.

Then another of the ponies in the crowd did the same, at a slightly faster walk.

The next three ponies approached the corkboard at a trot. The rest of the crowd exchanged glances, then darted toward Lapis' corkboard at a full gallop, several arguments quickly developing as the ponies jostled against each other to get order slips. Lapis took a step back in surprise, his eyes widening and his ears tucking back as the ponies started shouting over each other.

Yeah, today's gonna be a long day.

It turned out, Lapis was right. He didn't get a chance to get back into his shop until six hours later, by which time the sun had been down for at least an hour, and he still had half the orders on the notice board to take care of. Lapis locked the door behind himself, walked straight to his bed, and flopped down onto it face-first with a groan. *I don't think I've been this tired since the Summer Sun Celebration.*

That had been a week ago, now, and a little more than that since Lapis and Nikki had discovered the false wall in his closet. Lapis had yet to see hide or hair of Princess Celestia, and though he'd shared a few breakfasts with Lyra and Bon-Bon, all parties involved had so far been too busy to actually hang out. Way, way too busy, in Lapis' case.

Lapis rolled onto his back and stared up at the ceiling. *So busy, I haven't had a chance to work on getting back home.*
Home... I just wanna sleep. Can't I just sleep, please? Let things fix themselves tomorrow?

Unfortunately, that'd been his strategy for the last week, and it hadn't worked at all. If Lapis wanted to get back home, then his normally low tolerance for putting in actual effort just wasn't going to cut it.

So, grimacing, Lapis rolled out of bed, splashed some water on his face, and went back into the front room of his shop. Then, after glancing out the window to make sure nopony was watching, he opened up the closet behind the counter and stepped inside, closing it behind himself.

There were, as it turns out, two features of this closet would leave a pony scratching their heads at the room. As Nikki had discovered, the room was smaller than it should've been - and as for the tool rack, why would a repair-pony need a fireman's axe?

Eventually, Lapis had discovered the fireman's axe wasn't really a tool at all; rather, it was a cleverly disguised handle. And the room was smaller than it should've been because the wall with the tool rack...

Is actually a door, Lapis thought, turning the axe and pulling the door open. Beyond was a narrow, steep staircase, sloping down into a brightly-lit stone basement. Whoever had build the secret door had put a lot of engineering effort into this closet - Lapis hadn't had time to investigate the details, but

as long as the secret door was open, the regular door to the closet would stick shut - blocked, he suspected, by some latch underneath the floorboards.

Lapis headed down the staircase and into the basement, shaking his head in amazement as he took in the room for the third time. Whatever pony had lived in this house before Lapis, they'd used their mysterious secret basement to set up and maintain what looked an awful lot like a machining shop. There was a grindstone and a rotary wire brush, a large, clean workbench, and something that looked a lot like a forge - complete with an anvil, a large metal bucket, and a rack of hammers, tongs, and other assorted tools. It wasn't a big basement, but it felt open - the center of the room had been kept studiously clean, and the workbenches and tools were all pressed against the dully-gleaming gray stone of the walls, so that there was no need to step around anything you hadn't put there yourself. Above, the ceiling was shaped almost like a wide, upside-down funnel, which looked as if it would channel smoke to the hole in the center of the roof - which, Nikki had discovered, led to a chimney outside.

Lapis stared up at the chimney-hole for a moment, then turned and walked to the workbench. To one side of it was an old, empty notebook - the edges of its pages were worn and yellow, but the book was still usable. The rest of the bench was clear, though it bore the scratches and dents that were the mark of any well-loved workspace.

I know exactly one thing about this room, Lapis thought, sitting back on his rump and staring around it. Whoever made it, they knew what they were doing. What I don't know is why they did it. Why would some pony decide to set up a whole blacksmith's shop, complete with ventilation, inside a hidden basement in their house?

“Who lived here?” Lapis muttered.

The words, though quiet, seemed to echo in the small space, returning to his ears as fragmented whispers. No answers were forthcoming, so, with a sigh, Lapis picked up the stack of books he'd taken from the Golden Oak, set them on the workbench, and glared down at their titles, which refused to yield any new information:

The Horn is Quicker Than the Carriage: Transportation for the Time-Pressed Unicorn

Shape-Shifting and Other Ways of Escaping the Sordid

The Totaled Theories of Harmonick Resonance, and Their Applickation to Mending the Otherwise Irreparable

He'd tried reading beyond the titles multiple times now, and found that they all assumed the reader already had a grasp of several fundamentals of magic - an understanding that Lapis didn't have. Lyra had recommended several beginner's guidebooks to Lapis, but the problem with those guidebooks was that they were inside the Golden Oak Library - which, as of a week ago, was home to one Twilight Sparkle. And Lapis absolutely could *not* get involved with Twilight Sparkle or her friends, or else he could kiss his time for research goodbye.

So, Lapis cracked open the book on magical transportation, flipped to the chapter on teleportation spells, and set to reading. The first sentence was all it took to give him the impression that he wouldn't learn a thing tonight, but he read it anyway.

Not like there's anything else I could do.

...Huh.

Or is there?

Sometimes, it paid to know a pigeon.

The morning after he'd decided to work on getting home again, Lapis asked Nikki to keep an eye on the Golden Oak, and to let him know if it looked like Twilight would be out for a long period of time. Then, he went about business as usual - or, well, he started cleaning up after the Bunny Incident as quickly as he could.

Lapis had finished up with the "B-day" requests by afternoon the following day, and was headed back down Cantering Boulevard to pick up whatever

other slips had accumulated at his workshop when he spotted a problem. Rainbow Dash was standing in front of one of the shops. She looked slightly more ruffled than usual, with short bits of straw sticking out of her mane as she apologized to an amused-looking Earth-pony mare through an open window.

Lapis glanced at the roof of the building, and wasn't surprised to see a pegasus-shaped crater in the store's thatched roof. Cleaning up the aftermath of Rainbow's rooftop "landings" represented about a sixth of Lapis' job. If Rainbow were already up and away, he'd offer to take a request slip for the storeowner - but, well, there she was.

Detour time. Lapis hung a right, slipping through an alley, and emerged onto a side street - but when he rounded the corner, there was an odd creature leaning up against one of the store walls.

It looked like someone had taken the head and plumage of an extra-large, moody-looking bald eagle (white head feathers, hooked yellow beak, brown everything else) and attached it to an animal with the general body plan of a lion. It had wings on its back - brown to match its body feathers - and its feet were mismatched: the front half had the yellow, clawed talons of an eagle while the back half had the padded paws of a lion. It looked bored, or maybe impatient, staring idly up at the sky as it scratched a lazy circle in the dirt.

Lapis went on guard at once, eyeing the creature warily as he started walking past it. *Is that a griffon? Aren't they carnivores or something? Might be aggressive, I'd probably better avoid-*

The griffon turned to glance at Lapis through half-lidded yellow eyes, then nodded upward, speaking in a rough, high voice. "'Sup."

Oh. "'Sup," Lapis said, returning the griffon's nod, then setting off down the road at his normal pace. *Huh. Well, that was easy.*

Not long after, he turned onto his street to see Lyra and Bon-Bon standing out in front of his house, supporting between them a long, narrow cylinder of what looked like dark green cloth. They looked up as he approached, and

Lyra offered a cheerful grin and a wave as he started toward them, propping herself and the rug against his front door.

“What’re you two doing out here?” Lapis said, once he got within earshot of the pair.

“Well, I was cleaning out my closet,” Bon Bon said, “and I found this rug tucked away in the back. Lyra and I don’t have room for it in our house anymore-”

“And besides, it’s totally the wrong color scheme for our decor!”

“...And that,” Bon Bon finished. “So, we decided to drop by and see if you wanted it.”

Lapis blinked, then grinned, taking in the rug. “Oh, wow. Uh, yeah, it’ll do pretty nicely for the front room. Here, let me get the door real quick...”

He opened the door, and Lyra fell through the open doorway with a yelp, the rug following her into Lapis’ shop shortly afterward. “Oh. Whoops.”

“I’m okay!” Lyra wheezed, sticking a hoof out from beneath the rolled-up rug. “Just... need a little help getting this thing off me.”

Bon Bon gave the rug a firm nudge with one hoof, and it unrolled to the right, Lyra sitting up just in time to watch the last few inches slap flush against the wooden floor. “Hey! It really *does* work with the giant window!”

“Should help keep this place from echoing so much, too,” Bon Bon added, scuffing the rug with her hoof. “You like it?”

Lapis gave the unrolled rug a second look. It wasn’t quite a rectangle - its corners had been trimmed at an angle, so that it was technically an octagon - but it left a margin of about three feet to every side, meaning Lapis didn’t have to move his table and chairs. It had trim of a slightly different color, too - a lighter green, maybe with a bit of yellow to it, that was just bright enough to add some contrast without being garish.

“Yeah,” Lapis said, nodding as a smile dawned on his face. “I do.” He stared for another few seconds, then shook himself and turned to his guests. “So, cleaning house, are we?”

“Yep,” Bon Bon replied. “You wouldn’t believe how much dusting we’ve had to do, though.”

“I can guess,” Lapis said, looking over his house. “When I moved into this place, there was so much of the stuff on the ground, you’d almost think it was carpet. At least you got the rug cleaned out, though.”

“Yeah!” Lyra said, grinning as her ears tucked themselves back. “We totally did! Had to, um, beat it up with a broom handle! Both of us. At once.”

“...With the same broom handle?” Lapis asked, cocking an eyebrow.

“N-no, of course not! We, uh, actually own two broo-” Lyra started, before Bon Bon stuffed a hoof over her mouth. “What she means is that she held the rug upright, and I beat it with the broomstick.”

“Oh, okay,” Lapis said. *Bullshit*, he thought. “So, do you have the house-cleaning situation under control over there, or could you use a helping... hoof?”

“Oh, we just finished for today,” Lyra added, pulling Bon Bon’s hoof down from her face. “But we might drop by with more stuff later on, if we find anything nice!”

“Well, alright,” Lapis said. “Go ahead and just leave it outside the door if I’m not here - as long as it isn’t pink or fluffy, I’ll take whatever I can get.”

“Perfect,” Bon Bon replied, smiling as she turned to head out the door, dragging Lyra behind her. “We’ve got plenty, so you’d better be ready to fill up your spare rooms.”

“And feel free to drop by if you need help moving anything!” Lyra called out, sticking her head through the doorframe. “See you later, bye!”

“See you two around!” Lapis called back, as Bon Bon got Lyra out the door with a final tug. He shut the door, then turned to look at the rug again. Tentatively, he looked around, then lowered his head and scuffed it with his hoof.

The texture was soft, and only slightly fluffy, but it was definitely warmer than the floor already. Lapis gently brought his hoof down as if he was taking a step, and sure enough, the rug did an excellent job of silencing his hoofsteps.

The smile returned onto Lapis’ face as he raised his head back up, then stepped fully onto the wool. He briefly jogged in place, relishing how the padded surface muffled the sound of his hooves, then stopped, satisfied. He’d never owned a rug before.

Aside from some deafening shrieking noise coming from near the Brookway Bridge later in the afternoon, the rest of the day was uneventful. Halfway through the following day, however, Lapis was going down the main road when he heard a coo. He looked up just in time to see Nikki land on his back.

“Go-time?” he asked.

Nikki nodded in reply, smirking as Lapis gave her a bag of mixed seeds from his saddlebag. She grabbed it and took to the skies as Lapis changed directions, heading straight for the Golden Oak.

*Alright, he thought, let’s go over this one more time. What’s the plan?
Priority One: Get in, check for any of the guidebooks Lyra recommended, get them, get out.*

Priority Two: If it looks like I’ve got time, snoop around a little and make sure Twilight isn’t onto me. Which... she shouldn’t be, but it never hurts to check. At most-

“Sup.”

“Sup,” Lapis replied.

-At most, she’s noticed that one of the books I borrowed is missing. Even that’s not a big deal, it just means I’ve gotta slip it through the return slot

sometime soon.

Almost there now, Lapis thought, entering the clearing that surrounded the Golden Oak and checking his saddlebags with magic. *Supply check time. Forged order slip? Check.*

Tools consistent with forged order slip? Check.

Emergency Anti-Pinkie Mask? Check.

Let's do this.

Lapis set his jaw, then pushed open the door to the Golden Oak. The bell above the door jingled cheerily as he made his way inside and closed the door.

Sure enough, Nikki's tip had been good - the Golden Oak was, for the moment, deserted. *Although, Twilight's definitely spruced up the place since I was last in here,* Lapis thought, taking a moment to notice the complete lack of dust, the multitude of candles and iron-framed oil lanterns, and the new curtains on the windows.

No time. Where's the guidebooks? Lapis checked the shelves where he'd last searched for magic, and was pleased to find that - whatever organizational system had been in place before - Twilight hadn't changed it. *Okay. Lyra recommended The Fundamentals of Spellcasting and Magic for Dummies. Let's start with the F's.*

Lapis started scanning the shelf, pausing only momentarily to glare at *The Elements of Harmony - A Reference Guide*, the brass bindings of which glimmered almost cheerfully in the lanternlight. He found the *The Fundamentals* almost immediately afterward: a substantial, friendly-looking volume bound in dark green canvas, with a small illustration of a grinning unicorn on the spine. It was heavier than he'd expected in his saddlebag, and Lapis ended up tugging on the strap across his back as he started looking for *Magic for Dummies*.

He ended up not being able to find it, and so turned toward the door - only to stop when he saw the notice that had been tacked to the adjacent wall.

“Wanted Books - Listed in catalog, but not found in library or check-out records,” Lapis mumbled, his face slackening. “*The Horn is Quicker Than the Carriage, Shape-Shifting and Other Ways of Escaping the Sordid, The Totaled Theories of Harmonick Resonance*. Reward of... 75 bits a book, representing 50% of the fines to be levied at the responsible pony?!”

...Well, so much for the worst-case scenario. Lapis grimaced, pulling the book out of his saddlebags, then looked between the poster and the cover. *How does she plan on levying the fines? Does she have some kind of... detective spell, or something she can cast on the books to see who's touched them? Can she even lay out fines to begin with - no, of course she can, she's the Princess' student. Wait - is she like a federal officer? Is this a federal crime?! Am I a felon?!*

“Shit,” Lapis muttered, his eyes wide, his ears flopping back against his head. *Okay. New plan, fast. Can't take the book out of the library, or else that's just more... whatever-crime-this-is... on my head. C'mon, think...*

He spotted a spare quill, an inkwell, and a roll of parchment sitting on a nearby desk, and lunged toward them almost at once, spreading the book open to the table of contents - and then shaking his head. *No, I don't have time to skim the whole thing. Just the few big keywords that keep coming up... here's hoping this thing has a glossary and an index.*

Flipping to the back revealed that, luckily, it had both. Lapis briefly considered his options, then decided to focus on the word that had come up most often: “starswirls.” He pulled a sheet of parchment over and frantically copied down the definition-

the low-level magical field generated around a pony's hoof which enables them to “grip” light objects via thaumic pressure differential

-before jumping over to the item of next highest priority on his list: “accord.” *Probably should've done that one first, keep it in alphabetical order, but whatever.* He flipped to the glossary, only to find the phrase *See Chapter Forty-Six* staring back up at him. *Oh. Helpful.*

Lapis flipped back to the table of contents, then all the way to the very last chapter of the book, where he quickly skimmed to the end of the introductory paragraph before he started copying down.

“This accordant conduciveness, the emotional state of a pony as they cast a spell, is one of the most surefire predictors of a spell’s likelihood to achieve the intended effects - whether it’ll be in Harmony with the caster’s will, or instead sow Discord. If you’re sure your friend is going to love the fireworks you’ve bought, and you’re excited to watch their face light up, then your Candle-Flame Casting won’t light anything but the fuse, every time. But if you’re only casting the spell to distract them from a mess you’ve caused, and you’re worried they’ll be upset with you if they find out what’s really going on... well, it’s a good idea to have a bucket of water ready.”

Lapis blinked. ...*So, honest intentions good, secrecy bad? That explains the low crime rate around here, but it doesn’t bode well for me.*

“...still can’t believe she would just shove you out of the way like that!”

Lapis froze, cocking his ear as he recognized Twilight’s voice approaching the front door. *Time to go.*

“Eh,” a boy’s voice said as Lapis quickly snapped the book shut and floated it onto the shelf, rolling up his notes and tucking them into his bag. “That cake was *really* good, so overall, I’m thinking of the whole thing as an opportunity. Besides, it takes more than just a griffon to put a scratch on *these* scales!”

“...Uh-huh.”

Lapis walked over to the same window he’d used last time, quickly glancing around for any sign of Pinkie or the rest of Twilight’s friends, then opened it and leaped outside. Then, keeping a magical grip on his mask just in case, he quickly slipped onto a side-street and started the walk back to his workshop.

When Lapis finally got back to his workshop, he found a whole bed - not just a mattress, not just a frame, but an entire extra bed complete with pillows and a heavy woolen blanket - sitting in front of his door. Nikki was perched atop one of the bedposts, regarding Lapis with what looked like faint curiosity.

“Lyra and Bon Bon?” Lapis asked, pointing at the bed with a hoof.

Nikki nodded. Lapis shook his head in amusement, then walked around the side of the bed to find that it had been accompanied by a weighty, iron-bound chest of drawers, two simple wooden nightstands, and a framed picture of a chestnut-feathered griffon with a faintly smug grin and an enormous handlebar mustache - so large, in fact, that it didn’t even fit in the frame, its perfectly coiffed lengths extending to both sides of the portrait and out of sight.

Lapis levitated the picture up to eye-level and grinned. *Oh, I am keeping this painting. Actually, you know what, I’m keeping all of this. Lyra, Bon Bon - the next time we meet up, I’m paying for the coffee.*

Wrangling all the stuff through the front door was difficult enough to make him reconsider keeping it - especially the bed - but he got there eventually. The bed, the chest of drawers, and one of the nightstands ended up shoved into a spare bedroom, though he swapped out his current blanket for the woolen one. Then, Lapis quickly cooked himself a hayburger, sat the portrait of the mustached griffon in the chair opposite himself, and sat down to have some dinner just as it started to rain outside, quickly opening the door to let Nikki take shelter from the downpour. She settled herself atop one of the lanterns, fluffing her feathers up until she was a poofy ball, and promptly fell asleep, leaving Lapis to enjoy his hayburger with no company but the rain.

Lapis looked across the table at the mustached portrait as he ate, trying to figure out where was the best spot to put it. It would certainly brighten up the patch of bare wall opposite the window in the front room, but it might also fill some space in his bedroom, or the hallway.

Where will I spend more time? Lapis wondered. Where will I see it more often?

He snorted. *Well, I don't really spend a lot of time in this house at all. The downstairs workshop, maybe, but I'm only in this room for the mornings and early evenings. And besides, it's not like I'll be living in Ponyville for long, right?*

Lapis' chewing slowed, and he stared down at his plate for a moment. ... *Right?*

Well, of course he wasn't. He'd just managed to get his first lead on translating his books on magic, and... well, magic was magic. If he could make two halves of a broken plate join back into an unbroken whole without even thinking about it, then surely Earth was just a few steps away. Twilight had teleported a few times in the show - Lapis was hoping the answer was as simple as learning the same spell she had, and then picking his home on Earth as the destination.

And that'll only take an afternoon or two, tops, Lapis thought. So, honestly, I might as well not even hang up the painting at all - well, not until I get back home, anyway. It'll be a nice memento. Lapis nodded, then took a decisive bite of his hayburger-

His door slammed open, and Lapis almost choked on his food. A thunderclap rattled the building, the accompanying flash of light momentarily silhouetting the griffon he'd greeted earlier standing in his doorway. She was panting and dripping wet, the scowl on her face showing no hint of any emotion but seething anger.

“Hey, you,” she spat, glaring at him with the bright-yellow eyes of an exceptionally annoyed eagle. “Pigeon-colt. How much to rent out a room for the night?”

Back on Earth, Lapis' house had been at the intersection of two long, isolated country roads in the middle of what his grandpa had lovingly referred to as “bum-fuck nowhere, Ohio.” It wasn’t uncommon during spells of bad weather for drivers to get stranded in the area, and only slightly less strange for them to ask to stay the night. His mom had always

kept the guest bedroom ready for just this purpose, and had made a point of only offering a price to the folks who demanded one.

As such, it only took a few seconds for Lapis to process the griffon's question. "Let's start with thirty bits for bed and breakfast, and add on either the story of how you got here or ten extra."

The griffon bristled, then stepped inside, reaching under her wing and producing a small, worn coin-pouch. "You're getting thirty-five, no 'story,' and my promise not to borrow anything. Deal?"

"...Deal," Lapis said, cocking an eyebrow. ... '*Borrow?*' *Excuse me?* 'What's the name?'"

"Gilda," the griffon replied, counting coins out onto the counter. "You?"

"Lapis Print," Lapis replied. "Your room's the second door down that hall. You're lucky, I only just got a spare bed this evening."

"Tell it to somegriffon who cares," Gilda said. She finished counting out the coins, then stalked off down the hall. A few seconds later, Lapis heard the door creak open briefly before slamming shut.

...*Well, that happened,* Lapis thought, cocking an eyebrow down the hall. He stood up, headed over to the counter, and quickly counted the coins into the bag of bits he kept underneath. *Considering her "borrow" comment, maybe I'd better put these in the basement tonight.*

Although... this visit might actually be an opportunity. Right now, Lyra and Bon Bon think I was raised by griffons... Lapis stared into the bag of bits for a second, the gears turning in his head. ...Maybe I could learn a thing or two about griffon culture over breakfast?

Grinning, Lapis opened the closet door and stepped inside, levitating the bag of bits in with him - then, after a moment's hesitation, he grabbed the portrait of the mustached griffon as well. *I'll just leave it at the foot of the stairs for now.*

Between the sound of the heavy wooden door thumping shut and the boom of thunder that split the air at that moment, there was a split second where Lapis would've been hard-pressed to hear the roar of an enraged adult dragon - let alone the frustrated, tortured groan of a griffon as she pressed her face into a stranger's pillow, tried to forget the only friend she'd ever had, and clenched her beak shut against what she refused to think of as anything but a yell. Because she hadn't cried since she was a cub, and that wetness pressing into her eyes from the pillow was nothing but a few more drops of rainwater.

No matter how salty it smelled.

Lapis woke up early the next morning, and instantly regretted it.

Groaning, he sat up in bed, shielding his eyes from the first faint glow of sunlight on the horizon with a raised hoof. He'd spent half the night trying to use the definitions he'd copied down to decipher something, *anything* useful about magic, but so far he'd only managed to connect "starswirls" to the strange gripping sensation he'd felt upon shaking hooves with Big Mac. Eventually, he'd come to the conclusion that he'd need to make a repeat visit to the Golden Oak, and had retired to bed not long after. It had taken him longer to get to sleep than he'd hoped for - for a while, all he could think of was how much his family must be missing him.

Lapis flung his blankets off himself, then stumbled out of bed and into the kitchen, shaking those thoughts out of his head. *Okay. Breakfast and coffee first, make plans for library visit later.*

It was a lucky thing that ponies could, apparently, eat eggs, and that the Mayor's hiring bonus had let Lapis afford some cooking utensils on top of groceries and his old bed set. Lapis would *not* have been able to handle a completely vegan diet, even if his new body belonged to an obligate herbivore - being able to have scrambled eggs with spinach, mushrooms, and Swiss to go with a morning cup of coffee was a very welcome surprise, and it meant that he didn't go hungry as he got started mixing some eggs, flour, butter, cream, baking powder, and sugar in a bowl.

Once Lapis had added salt and blueberries, and gotten the results of his mixing onto a baking sheet and into the oven, the start of his morning turned out to be his favorite kind of peace and quiet. He got to look out his broad window as he sipped his coffee, watching as the sun rose and Ponyville came to life one pedestrian at a time, trying to put together the best questions to ask his houseguest.

Lapis' coffee had just kicked in by the time he started hearing movement from his guest bedroom. He stood, clearing his own plate and moving into the kitchen - breakfast wasn't done baking yet, but it wouldn't be cooking for long now, either.

"Breakfast should be ready in about five minutes," Lapis said, as he heard the muffled clicking of talons pass by the door to the kitchen. "How do you take your eggs?"

"Whatever gets them on a plate two minutes ago," he heard the griffon yawn through the door.

"Plain scrambled, coming right up."

In the time it took Lapis to get a couple of eggs scrambled, seasoned, and on a plate, the other half of breakfast had finished baking. He grabbed one off the sheet for himself, then added two of the pastries onto Gilda's plate before he stepped out of the kitchen into the front room.

Gilda had taken his chair. She was pointedly looking away from the window, glaring into an empty corner of the room and drumming her talons on the table. She pulled a double-take when Lapis got her plate in front of her, picking up one of the scones on her plate in a single clawed forepaw. "Are *these* why you stayed up all night?" she muttered.

Lapis shook his head. "Nah, scones only take about half an hour to make. I kept you up?"

“Maybe.” Gilda set the scone down, picked up her fork, and pointedly avoided eye contact as she started into the eggs. Lapis took the obvious cue and went behind the counter to busy himself, munching at his scone as he started organizing the few bits of paperwork he had. Gilda kept eating, and Lapis found himself struck by the sight of the griffon manipulating the fork. He would’ve expected the three-inch knives on her fingertips to get in the way, but she seemed to work around them without any difficulty. As he watched, she used a talon on her free claw like a knife, bracing it against her fork to cut an especially large piece of egg with a casual, practiced swipe-

“Hey, weirdo. You got something you wanna say about my claws?”

Lapis blinked, looking up to see that Gilda was scowling up at him, her eyes narrowed. “Oh, it’s nothing. It’s just been a while since I’ve been around someone without hooves - reminds me of home, is all.”

“Uh-huh.” Gilda stuffed a forkful of egg into her mouth. “Lotta griffons live there?”

“...Not so much, no.”

“Yeah, I can tell.” Gilda swallowed, then turned to glare at him. “You make good eggs, so here’s your tip: don’t stare at a griffon’s claws unless you’re keen on getting a closer look. Way closer.”

Lapis ducked behind the counter, rolling his eyes as he searched for a pencil. “Let me guess: as in, coming-right-toward-my-face closer?”

“You catch on quick, huh?”

Lapis found his pencil, and quickly scribbled down a note, tuning out the griffon for a second. Staring at griffons’ talons: *major faux pas. Or maybe staring in general. Reasons unclear, further investigation likely unwise.*

“So why’re you still in this dump?” Gilda asked.

“Sorry?” Lapis said, tucking his note away and standing up.

“Ponyville,” the griffon said. “If you miss your ‘home,’ why’re you still here?”

Lapis quickly hid his grimace. “Well, it’s a bit of a long way out.”

“Uh-huh.” Gilda took another bite of egg. “Griffonstone’s a long way out, but I’m still going, soon as this plate’s empty. What’s stopping you?”

“...Money,” Lapis replied, grabbing a stack of completed request slips from below his desk. “It’s easier to come by here, and I’ll need a bit more of it to be comfortable once I get back.”

Gilda snorted, a smirk curling her beak. “You sure you don’t know any griffons? ‘Cause that’s just-” She glanced out the window, then cut herself off and ducked down out of sight.

“What’s with you?” Lapis asked, cocking an eyebrow.

“Shut up. Somepony’s coming down the road,” Gilda hissed.

“Yeah, it’s a thoroughfare, they do that. What’s the issue?”

“It’s somepony I don’t want to talk to,” the griffon growled, glaring up at him. Lapis cocked an eyebrow, then his eyes widened as a faint, all-too-familiar sound reached his ears - the steady, springing hoofsteps of Pinkie Pie.

Lapis grabbed the mask from his saddlebags, which were hung on a peg by the door, and slipped it onto his own face, ignoring Gilda’s look of utter bewilderment. Only once he was safely masked did he look out the window, scanning for the pink nightmare.

Sure enough, there was Pinkie. She was heading down the main road at her usual bouncing pace, briefly pausing midair to wave hello to Derpy Hooves. For a few brief seconds, Lapis thought he might not have anything to worry about.

Then, directly across from his shop, Pinkie paused. She cocked her head,

shutting her eyes and lifting her nose to sniff the air - then her head whipped around with uncanny speed, her too-wide eyes snapping directly onto Lapis' front door.

Lapis lurched away from his window at once, plastering himself against the inside of the door as the sound of Pinkie's sproinging began to grow louder. *Shit. Shitshitshit!*

"Hey!" a voice hissed. Lapis blinked, then looked down to see Gilda glancing between him and the window. "Is she coming this way?! Where can I hide?!"

For a second, Lapis considered telling Gilda to take it up with somepony who cared, but then he saw the panic in her glaring yellow eyes, and it was just too familiar to ignore. "Closet behind the counter," Lapis muttered, pointing with a hoof. "She's coming *now*, go-go-go!"

Gilda needed no further encouragement. She disappeared to the closet door in brown-and-white blur, whipping it open and shut with barely a thunk. Lapis was in front of the closet a second later, quickly tugging his crooked mask back into position as the *sproing, sproing, sproing* of Pinkie's approach came to a stop.

"Hmmm..." Lapis heard her saying from the other side of the door. "... Blueberry scones, with a little bit too much flour, served with a side of scrambled eggs and coffee!"

For a second, nothing happened. Then, the doorknob jiggled, and Lapis took a slow, deep breath in and held perfectly still.

The doorknob turned, and Pinkie burst in a second later, raising a hoof as she sang out, "Heeere's Pinkie!"

Perfectly... still, Lapis thought, forcing his eyelid not to twitch.

"Sorry to burst in, but it just smelled so tasty, I had to... huh? Hello-ooo?" Pinkie called out. "Anypony home?"

Pinkie took a few steps further in, glancing for a second at Gilda's plate on the table before wandering through the open door and into the kitchen.
“Ooh, tidy! ...Hey, does anypony mind if I have some of these scones?”

...Really?

“Aaany-pony at all?” Pinkie asked. “...No? Okey-dokey-lokey!”

Then, there was a brief, violent burst of wet noise, something like the low, sucking squelch of a booted foot sinking into a deep puddle of thick mud. It lasted only for a fraction of a second, but caught Lapis so off-guard that it took him a moment to recognize the sound of his sink running, and the dry scratching noise of his dish-brush being put to work. A few seconds afterward, it stopped, and Pinkie Pie bounced back into view, chewing blissfully as she meandered across the room and out of Lapis' shop, stopping only to shut the door behind her.

Lapis waited until he couldn't hear her sproinging, then started counting.
One. Two. Three-

“She gone yet?” Gilda hissed from behind the closet door, and Lapis jerked in surprise.

“...Probably,” he sighed, taking off the mask. “You alright in there?”

“Almost clipped my talon on the axe in there, but yeah, I’m cool,” Gilda replied, pushing the door open and brushing off her beak. “... You didn’t seriously hide from her with that, did you?”

“The mask? Yeah, that’s how I did it,” Lapis replied, tucking it back into his saddlebag. *Note to self: get a lock for the door. Maybe even a bar.*

“I don’t believe you,” Gilda said, cocking an eyebrow at him.

“If I wanted to lie to you, Gilda, I’d like to think I would pick a lie that made sense,” Lapis replied, suddenly exhausted. *I need more coffee.* “...

Can we just sit down and eat, please?”

“Works for me,” Gilda said, resuming her seat and poking at her now-cold plate of scrambled egg. Lapis turned and headed into the kitchen, partially to figure out what Pinkie Pie had done in there, and partially because he was considering whether or not to have another scone. Both concerns, however, were resolved by the sight of the now-empty baking sheet that sat on top of Lapis’ stove.

...There were nine scones on that sheet, Lapis thought, feeling his own jaw drop. *Nine.*

He spared a glance at his sink, and found his mood only slightly improved by the discovery that Pinkie had also washed and dried all his dirty dishes, leaving them in neat, sparkling-clean stacks beside the sink.

Well, at least now he knew what the odd noise had been.

Lapis walked back into the front room, slightly stunned, and took the seat opposite Gilda. She cocked an eyebrow as she looked up to see him empty-hooved. “Thought you were gonna grab a bite to eat.”

“I was,” Lapis replied. “Pinkie ate all the other scones.”

Gilda paused, glancing at one of her scones, which had what looked like a small nibble taken out of it. “You made more of these?”

“Yeah, I made a dozen of them,” Lapis said, making a helpless gesture with his hoof. “She ate the other nine.”

Gilda’s other eyebrow rose, then she scowled, spearing her last bite of eggs with her fork. “Pinkie Pie,” she muttered.

“Pinkie Pie,” Lapis agreed, and for a moment they sat in silence together.

“What’d she do to you?” Lapis eventually asked.

“You first,” Gilda said, sitting back in her chair. “How come you made that mask in the first place? Doesn’t seem like something you come up with on the fly.”

“Pinkie throws a party for every new pony in town,” Lapis said. Gilda’s face darkened at the words, and suddenly Lapis got the niggling feeling that he’d forgotten something, but he pressed on. “I’m not really a party ...pony, so I managed not to let her figure out where I live. If that changed... well, to start with, I’d end up spending the day afterward sweeping up streamers and ribbons, and then there’d still be confetti in every nook and cranny for years. Not to mention I’d probably have to deal with her way more frequently, since I bake sometimes and she’s definitely a pastry fan.

“The mask started out as a joke for myself. Well, a reference, but yeah, I wasn’t really expecting it to work. Then it did, and that broke my brain a little, until I just decided to not think about it too hard.” Lapis snorted. “Honestly, half the ponies in town seem to have that attitude about her. ‘Pinkie Pie’ is its own explanation. But that’s enough about me, what’s your story?”

“If I tell you, you’ll owe me five bits back,” Gilda said, staring at him levelly.

Lapis blinked, confused, until he remembered the terms he’d laid out the night before. “Oh yeah, I’d forgotten about that. ...Alright, look, I’d thought you were a fugitive or something, but it looks like it’s not the law you’re running from. So, if you don’t want to talk about it, I’m not going to buy it out of you-”

“Hey, I don’t run from *anything*,” Gilda snapped.

Lapis raised his hooves in surrender. “Okay, that’s fair.”

There were a few seconds of tense silence, then Gilda spoke again. “... You’d have taken in a fugitive?”

“You were acting like a jerk, not a crook,” Lapis said. “There was no real reason for me to think you were up to anything wrong, and I probably

could've argued that in court. Besides, money is money.”

Gilda snorted again, and that same smirk returned to her face. “...Alright, I gotta ask. Did you, or did you not, grow up in Griffonstone? Because you think more like a griffon than anypony I’ve ever met.”

“No, I didn’t,” Lapis replied. “Though, for some reason, most of the ponies I know think I did. Why, would I like it there?”

“Oh, you’d hate it,” Gilda replied, picking up a scone with one forepaw and leaning back in her chair. “Nogriffon does anything unless there’s bits in it for them, everygriffon’s more concerned about paying off their bills than about staying out of each other’s way, and the fewer questions you ask a griffon who’s trying to do stuff fast, the less likely you are to find out how sharp their talons are.”

“And you’re heading there?” Lapis muttered. “Doesn’t sound like a great vacation spot.”

“Nah, it’s cool sometimes,” Gilda replied, staring off into space. “Everygriffon gets that everygriffon else has stuff going on, so everyone’s chill with each other. You can walk into a bar and ask for the nastiest stuff they got, and as long as you got the bits, you’ll get it, no questions asked.” She chuckled. “Tartarus, most of the time, the griffon next to you’ll offer to share a toast, and you can drink together all night long without saying a word.”

Lapis nodded, trying not to show his astonishment. *Okay, recreational drinking is a thing here. Somehow.* Good to know.

“It’s cool,” Gilda repeated, and the smile on her beak mostly reached her eyes.

Lapis nodded again. “Yeah, sure. I could see that.”

Another silence fell, this one purely uncomfortable instead of tense. Gilda opened her beak, either to talk or to take a bite of her scone -

A knock echoed through the building, and both of them started in their seats. "Hey! Lapis, you home?"

Lapis recognized Bon Bon's voice, and stood to get the door. "Sorry, I gotta get this real quick-" He looked back just in time to catch the tuft of Gilda's lion-like tail disappearing into the hallway. *Huh. Guess she doesn't really want to talk to most ponies in this town, then?*

When Lapis opened the door, it was to find Bon Bon standing alone on the other side - and behind her...

"Uh," Lapis began.

"Is it too much?" Bon Bon asked, her ears half-folded back. "Because I tried to tell Lyra, but there's only so much I can say."

"No, no, it's exactly what I need," Lapis said, doing his best not to gape at the small cartful of decorations, small blankets, and assorted bric-a-brac that Bon Bon had pulled up to his house. "It's just- it's a lot, is all... Alright, look, there's no way you're getting all this from a spring cleaning, okay? Could you please just tell me what's really going on? Whatever it is, I promise I won't be mad."

Bon Bon winced. "Yeah, I told her it was too much." She sighed, then leaned in, speaking in a low, clear tone. "Alright, listen. I don't know if you remember it or not, but just after Princess Celestia left, you admitted that the reason you didn't have any boxes to unpack was because... well, because you didn't have anything when you moved here."

"I what?!" Lapis yelped. "That's not, um, uh... yeah, that's actually the reason." Lapis sighed, facehoofing. *Shit.* "I must have really been tired, huh?"

"You were. I'm honestly impressed that you didn't pass out in front of the Princess," Bon Bon said. "But anyway. Somehow, Lyra got it into her head

that the reason you didn't want to have Pinkie over for a party was because you were embarrassed about how empty your house was. So now... well, she's trying to fill it up."

"Oh. Great. I guess I'll need to talk to her, then."

"Yes, you do," Bon Bon replied, pulling her head back and speaking in a normal tone. "And make it a priority if you can - everything before now really *did* come from a spring cleaning, except the rug, but this wagonful was bought with the bits from all Lyra's performances last week. She was going to buy the two of us a spa trip, but we talked it over and I had to agree - if it's the way Lyra thinks it is, you're more important."

"It's not, trust me." Lapis said, waving a hoof. "And I'll pay you back, I've got the bits to spare. I just don't want to deal with Pinkie. Especially not after she broke in this morning, and ate nine of the dozen scones I made for breakfast."

Bon Bon cocked an eyebrow. "Huh. I didn't think you cooked. But yes, she does that. I'd check your pantry if I were you - she probably paid you back by doing a little more than just your dishes."

"-Wait, how'd you know she did my dishes?"

"Because she's done the same thing to me, too," Bon Bon sighed, unstrapping herself from the cart. "Word of advice - eat quickly, and don't leave pies or anything else to cool by an open window. Otherwise, you may as well hang a sign."

"Good to know," Lapis said. "And, uh... you're not going to leave that stuff here, are you?"

"Oh, yes I am," Bon Bon replied, smirking as she walked around to the back of the cart. "Lyra's got the wrong reasons, but I think she has the right idea: your house is too empty. It's not *you* yet, it's not your home, it's just a house that you live in." She pushed the cart through the door and into Lapis' front room, dusted off her hooves, then turned to face him again. "When I moved into Ponyville, I didn't realize how barren my home had

felt until after I put some pictures on the walls. I know it sounds silly, but the difference was like night and day - both for my house, and my mood.” Turning, she pointed to the cart with one hoof. “So. Start with these. Then, take some time to buy something for yourself, and to put it in a spot where you can see it. I promise, it’ll make you a happier pony. That’s my advice, whether you follow it or not is up to you.”

Lapis chuckled, rolling his eyes. “Alright, I’ll look into it. Thanks, Bon Bon.”

“Don’t mention it,” Bon Bon said, turning to leave. “Be careful out there.”

“Will do, you too!” Lapis called, as she turned and headed out the door.

As soon as Lapis shut the door, Gilda poked her head back around the corner. “You get a lot of visitors?”

“Not usually, no,” Lapis said, opening the door again to grab some notices off the board. “There might be a few ponies who show up to tack up some job requests, but beyond that, Bon Bon and her friend Lyra are the only two ponies I know.”

“Uh-huh.” Gilda nodded, then sat back down to eat. She picked up one of the scones, gave it a hesitant glance, then took a tentative bite. “...Hey, that’s not bad!”

“I do what I can,” Lapis replied, absently looking over the requests. *Gutter on Mane, chimney on Cantering, and a bunch of shingles on 69th.* A small grin spread across Lapis’ face. ...*Nice.*

“You’re seriously cool with that, aren’t you?”

Lapis blinked. “Huh?”

“Those two ponies, just... giving you free stuff,” Gilda said, gesturing to the pile of ornaments outside his door. “You’re not angry that they think you’re having a hard time, or anything?”

“Of course not,” Lapis said, frowning. “It’s free stuff, why would I be? It’d be like... I don’t know, like getting annoyed for getting presents on your birthday.”

“Presents are different, stupid,” Gilda said, huffing and sitting back in her seat, then taking another bite of her scone. “When ‘oo get somefin’ as a presen’, id’s cause you’re the big ‘fing that day anyway.” She swallowed, then continued. “But you don’t just give anygriffon free stuff for no reason. Not unless they’re cubs on their own, or their joints are so creaky they can’t work. If you’re a griffon getting free stuff, it’s other griffons saying you can’t take care of yourself.”

“...That’s really not what they have in mind,” Lapis said, shaking his head.

Gilda shrugged, taking another bite. “Well, id’s wha’ they’re sayin’ anyway.” She swallowed, smirking over at him. “Did you just not realize that before now, or what?”

“No, I knew,” Lapis said, looking over his order slips again, then picking an assortment of tools from the closet and levitating them over to his saddlebags. *Looks like... two total rooftops need fixed on funny-number street, both resulting from pegasus crashes. Was there a bad gust of wind over there or something?* “I’m just more grateful for the help than I’m resentful for needing it. It lets me know they care about me, and that’s not the worst thing to know.”

Gilda hesitated, her half-eaten scone halfway to her mouth. “...Uh-huh.” She scowled, then took another bite of her scone, glaring out the window as she chewed.

Lapis watched, and as he did, he got that niggling feeling in his stomach again. *There’s something I’m forgetting. What is it, what is it... one of these requests, maybe?* He looked them over again, trying to figure out whether there was some tool he was missing.

“...I mean, I guess it’s pretty weird. Ponies are a pretty friendly bunch, on average,” Lapis said as he started digging through the closet. “It’s not hard to get them to care about you - I mean, look at me, I only got on Bon Bon’s

good side accidentally. All I did was cause her some trouble, apologize, and do what I could to fix it, then she started up some small talk, and then here she is a week and a half later, bringing me furniture and life advice for no reason other than being friendly.”

“You think it’s easy for them to stop caring about you, too?” Gilda muttered.

Lapis shook his head. “It’s weird, but somehow, I doubt it.”

“Uh-huh.” Gilda sighed, swallowed the last of her scone, then picked up the other in her free forepaw and stood. “Well, I’m outta here. Gotta get in the air while the thermals are still rising.”

“Good luck,” Lapis said, as he realized what he’d been missing in his saddlebags. *Spare nails for the shingles - duh.*

Gilda made it right to the front of the door, then paused. “...Hey, listen. It’s only because you made some lucky choices, but as far as griffon nest-n’-breakfasts go, this place wasn’t terrible.”

Lapis cocked his head. “Sorry, did you say *nest-n’-breakfast*?”

“Yeah,” Gilda said, shrugging. “What, do you call it a stable-n’-hay when you’re mostly serving ponies?”

Lapis’ face must’ve been answer enough, because Gilda rolled her eyes and smirked. “Whatever. Look, what I’m saying is, if you want to make some bits on the side giving griffons a place to stay the night, you could. Just put some trim around your door like an arch with three points on top, and if a griffon drops by, they’ll get the idea.”

“Huh. Is that like the griffon version of a vacancy sign or something?”

“Nah, it’s just something we do for our doors. It looks cool. Maroon or dark blue are your choices,” Gilda replied, pulling his door open. “Oh, and make those scones whenever you’ve got a griffon over. Scones are kind of an us thing, too.”

“If I find a reliable way to keep Pinkie away, I will,” Lapis replied.

The smirk dropped off Gilda’s face. “Yeah. Her. I’m outta here.” She crouched low to the ground like a cat, raising her wings above her head - then brought them down, and disappeared into the sky at blurring speed, turning into a speck on the horizon after only a few moments.

As Gilda flew off, turning toward Griffonstone, she’d rather not have had a lot on her mind. Munching on the other scone helped - griffon scones were better, but pony scones weren’t awful, not by a long way. Still, there was one pony she couldn’t put out of her head, and it wasn’t the colt she’d just told about the cool parts of griffon culture.

The reason she’d taken off so fast, high, and early was Rainbow Dash. Dealing with *her* right now wasn’t going to be good - right now, all she wanted to do was get back to Griffonstone, but that didn’t stop her from scanning the skies below her for her old pal.

She was over top of the town pond, doing her whole weather-director thing with the whistle and the yelling. When she gestured, she was moving her hooves pretty fast, but from up here Gilda couldn’t tell whether she was trying to hide being bummed out, or just being bossy. If she got close enough to see whether Dash had tucked back her ears or not, she’d know - ponies’ ears were almost built-in lie detectors, and Dash was no exception.

Gilda groaned, rolling her eyes and stuffing her beak with more scone.
Yeah, I’m not getting anywhere near her right now. Couldn’t pay me to.

The pigeon-colt’s words seemed to echo in her head for a second. *“All I did was cause some trouble for her, apologize, and do what I could to fix it... It’s weird, but somehow, I doubt it.”*

“Yeah, well, trouble isn’t how we started,” Gilda muttered, glaring down at the last few bites of the scone. “It’s how we ended.”

Regardless, the words lingered as heavily as Gilda's scowl as she turned her gaze forward and set off for Griffonstone.

Lapis emerged from the closet a few seconds later. Instead of any of his tools, the object he held in front of him in a magical grip was the portrait of the mustached griffon - though, he did grab a hammer and nail out of his saddlebag as he passed it by.

This, Lapis thought to himself as he started hammering the nail into his living room wall, isn't admitting defeat, no more than the rug is. I'm not giving up, not by a long way. But the fact of the matter is, getting home isn't going to be a weekend project. It'll take a while. And during that time...

Lapis finished, then carefully gripped the portrait with his magic. *During that time, it'll do me good to have a... a symbol. A reminder, that there are people who care about me. Not just back on Earth, but here, too. Something to help me know that I'm not alone.*

He chuckled as he hung the painting, stepping back to admire his work. *And besides, it'll make this house feel a little more comfortable, too. A little home-away-from-home.*

Lapis straightened the painting, then cocked an eyebrow at the portrait's smug-looking smirk. "You shut your beak," he said.

A coo came from the corner of the room, and Lapis looked over to see Nikki giving him a questioning look. "Sorry, not you. About to head out again, if you wanna come with."

Nikki yawned, stretched, then lazily glided down to land on Lapis' head as he slung the saddlebags over his shoulder and levitated a ladder over to his side. He made his way outside, running through his mental to-do list. *Let's see... The gutter will probably be the easy one, so I'll save that for last. Chimney and rooftops are things I'd better get out of the way now, before it gets too hot to be safe up on roofs. That leaves the middle of the day*

hopefully open to plan my next entry into the Golden Oak... and to buy some cheap lumber and dark blue paint.

Lapis propped the ladder up against the first house of the day, clambered onto the rooftop, and quickly scanned the skies for Rainbow Dash. Luckily, she was far off in the distance, over the small lake outside the village. It looked like the other pegasi were busy wrangling the weather, and she was directing them, blowing a whistle and barking orders, her ears tucked back flat against her head in what Lapis guessed was annoyance. *Yeah, she's busy. I'm in the clear.*

He got to work on the shingles, but that niggling feeling hit him again, and he took another second to look at Rainbow Dash. *First Gilda, and now her... what's bugging me?*

An image shot thought his mind like lightning: Rainbow and Gilda, sitting on a cloud together, Pinkie flying up toward them in what looked like a pedal-powered helicopter made out of candy. Lapis froze, his eyes snapping wide open as he remembered who Gilda was - and, more importantly, who her former best friend had been. *Shit. Did I change things? Shit, shit, shitshitshit-*

Nikki shifted atop Lapis' head, and Lapis wasn't able to react before she gave one of his ears a light, firm slap with her wing.

“Alright, alright,” he muttered, rubbing his stinging ear. “I’m back. Thanks.” *Gilda’s already gone, anyway - it’s not like there’s anything I can do.*

Lapis sighed, then grabbed the shards of a shingle, merging them together with a flash of light and a burst of warmth on his flank. *Besides, if I messed up, I’ll deal with the consequences when I see them. For now, I’d better focus on what I can see coming.*

He nodded, put the first loose shingle back into place, and set to work.

Author's Notes:

Actual author's note happens in a second, but first things first:

Patch Notes (v1.0.1)

Luna's wings incorrectly rendered as jet-black in Section B - lowered base contrast settings, wings now appear "dark" (Those Kids in the Corner)

Derpy's coat incorrectly rendered as white in Section B - lowered base contrast settings also resolved this, coat now appears "cloudy gray" (Kevin Lee, Courage Fire)

Lyra fails to remember Twilight, despite having apparently met her in Canterlot earlier that morning. This is because the NPC-generation algorithm for Canterlot grabs from a selection of base skins, one of which is Lyra's - the Canterlot NPC that resembles Lyra is not her, despite her matching appearance (Kevin Lee, FanOfMostEverything - kudos to CasualReader for their explanation of possibility; unfortunately, the only way I could think of to incorporate Casual's suggestion was head trauma, and amnesia has always just kinda been... eh? for me.)

And, now that that's taken care of - hey, welcome to Episode III! Thanks for caring enough about the story to read the next steps of it, even after the almost-two-weeks it's been since the last upload.

This chapter took me longer than I was hoping for, partially because I was moving during that time, and partially because it took me longer than I'd hoped to figure out what would be a plausible "this-house-gets-griffons" identifier (major props to tkefner for providing not one, but TWO timelines I was completely unaware of, and for telling me that the MLP wiki has a transcript of every episode!) On a related note, the trim over doors that Gilda mentions near the end of the chapter is canonically a feature shown on the smaller houses in Griffonstone - although, it's often-to-always an indentation instead of a trim-piece. Additionally, "griffon scones" are a thing, though Gilda is a significantly less accomplished baker than Lapis or Pinkie.

I was also unsure of how to get Gilda's characterization right - on the one hand, she's definitely a jerk, but on the other, she's not irredeemable. There's also that whole bit about her being supposed to

represent the disdain that some folks feel for little girls' TV. What really bugged me, though, and what led me to write Gilda the way I did, was how the show just kinda brushed off the cut-off of the friendship between Gilda and Rainbow Dash. Sure, you gotta cut the problems out of your life, but it's going to hurt for a while afterward, and it felt (in my opinion only, which is likely not justified) that the writers just forgot about that for a while. Oh, and there's also the whole "Gilda's a jerk, but she's a funny jerk" thing - which I'd loved to have gotten into, but I just felt like she wouldn't be in the mood for humor right then.

Last two things, really quick: first, yes, it's weird that Lapis remembers random bits of the show without recalling names. I'll get to explaining that, I promise - it's just that I'm deliberately doing exposition about who Lapis really is through his identity crises, and he already had one this chapter, so... that. And second, it is with nothing but the greatest pride that I can report to Mad Maudlin that the "herd" fanon is near the very top of the list of Things I Won't Touch, deprived of first-place position only by the "heat" fanon.

Thanks again, and I'll see you in the next one!

0_0_4: Thunder/Head-On

Lapis' first clue that he would be in for a rough night was when he realized the crowd outside the Golden Oak Library was all looking in the same direction.

Crowds weren't unusual in Ponyville. There were a lot of ponies living there, of course a lot of them were going to end up in the same space every now and again. What was unusual was when a crowd was all looking at the same thing - which, Lapis found as he craned his neck over top of the other spectators, appeared to be some kind of stage. It hadn't been there this morning, but it was here now - small, but extravagant all the same. Standing atop it was a pale blue unicorn mare, wearing a purple, star-patterned wizard's hat and cloak.

Unlike with Gilda, Lapis recognized this unicorn immediately. It was Tricksy - *no, wait, isn't that spelled with an X? Yeah, it's 'Trixie,' right - the loudmouth stage magician. And she's not wearing the Definitely-Not-The-One-Ring necklace, so that means... this is the episode with the giant bear.*

Lapis glanced around to make sure no ponies in the crowd were looking at him, then sighed and sat on his rump. *Welp. At least I know Twilight's going to solve the whole giant, rampaging star-bear problem inside of a few minutes, so it won't end up being an all-night affair like the Summer Sun Celebration was. Still, I'd better head to bed early tonight, if I can - tonight's sleep is probably going to be very much interrupted.*

As Lapis looked on, Trixie threw her forehooves wide - and her stage erupted into a tiny, well-contained fireworks display, a miniature Catherine wheel suddenly kicking into motion with a flurry of gleaming, smokeless sparks. Lapis blinked in surprise as, only a few seconds later, the lights of the display coalesced into what looked almost like animated neon signs, showing Trixie herself standing up to a scaled-down image of the star-bear. *Huh. That's... odd. Is her stage making those fireworks with magic? I mean, every firework I've ever seen leaves behind a lot of smoke, and this is*

leaving none. So it's gotta be magic, right?

Huh. Lapis frowned in concentration as the gears started to turn in his head. But her horn isn't lighting up when the fireworks show goes off, so it's definitely the stage that's responsible. Mechanical magic, or maybe just mechanical manipulation of magic... wonder if there's a name for that? Or a book... Lapis snorted, standing back up as he spotted Twilight and her friends in the front row of the crowd, their faces vaguely disgusted as they muttered to each other. Yeah, nope. No way I'm heading to the library anytime soon. Especially not today - today is packed.

Lapis headed away from the crowd, quickly checking through a few of his order slips. *If I want to get any more attempts at studying done, I need to get these orders knocked out fast. So, let's see here... a loose shutter, a crooked door, and a table with a broken leg. Let's get the table first, I should be able to knock that out inside of a few minutes... where is it?*

Lapis slid the other orders back into his saddlebags, quickly looking over the rest of the order slip. *Request filed by one Mr. Cake, of... the Sugarcube Corner Bakery. Wait, isn't that the building that looks like someone stacked cupcakes on a gingerbread house? Huh. Well, maybe I'll see if I can buy some donuts or something from there.*

I mean, it's not like fixing a broken table is going to take too long, right?

“...And this is the table, right here,” said Mr. Cake, gesturing to what was almost a normal coffee table.

Lapis cocked an eyebrow, looking at the stack of circular metal pans that sat where one of the table’s legs should be. “Wow, that’s a lot of cake pans.”

“Well, we are a bakery,” the stallion quipped. His name was Carrot Cake, and the name fit - his coat was a yellow-cake sort of color, his mane and tail were carrot-orange, and even his Cutie Mark was three square slices of his namesake. He had a taller, lankier build than most other ponies in town, and his angular, freckled muzzle had a slight underbite.

“Oh! I was wondering about the home decor,” Lapis said, nodding in mock-realization.

The baker grinned. “Nope! Complete coincidence, actually. Oh, I think I left the table leg under the cabinets. Here, I’ll get it.”

Lapis eyed the tall stack of cake pans again. “What were you doing when you needed to use all these? It had to have put a dent in your production.”

“Eh?” the baker asked from inside the kitchen. “Oh, you mean the cake pans? Well, we really don’t use them too often - most of our business is cupcakes, ya know.” He trotted back into the room a few moments later, holding the table leg between his teeth.

Lapis picked up the table, scooting the stack of cake pans to the side, then levitated the leg over to the rest of the table to inspect the damage.

Surprisingly, this wasn’t a case of stripped screw-holes or broken joints - no, the leg had just been snapped off about a sixth of the way down. Lapis floated the legs into position, aligned the halves, and blinked in the flash of light that accompanied his spell.

“Ooh!” Carrot Cake chimed in, ducking his head down just in time to watch the cracks spark themselves out of existence. “Well, isn’t that pretty. Take you long to learn that spell?”

“Longer than I’d have liked,” Lapis said, grinning through a sudden yawn. *If I’d been able to do this back on Earth... Focus.* “How’d this table get broken, anyway?”

“Oh!” The baker paused, tapping his protruding chin. “Well, Pinkie was in one of her baking frenzies, and she managed to slip on a cupcake pan.”

Lapis nodded. *Man, Pinkie just does whatever she wants, huh? Between Mr. Cake, Bon Bon, and me, I feel like half the town’s been a victim of hers by now.* “I get it. Must’ve been some angle if she managed to break just one leg, instead of the middle of the table.”

“Oh, no, she didn’t even touch the table,” Carrot Cake replied. “No, she landed on her hooves just fine, but she flipped a *full* cupcake pan over trying to grab the counter, and sent half a dozen cupcakes flying across the kitchen! Now, that would’ve been fine on its own, but since she had Gummy in there - her pet alligator, cute little guy - he went for the cupcakes. Jumped right off the counter to get ‘em! He did get a cupcake out of it, but of course Pinkie dived to catch him, right as I was walking in with a bag of flour. She knocked the both of us to the floor, dropped Gummy on my face, and sent the bag of flour flying!”

“...And *that* hit the table?” Lapis asked, cocking his head in bewilderment.

“Nope!” The baker shook his head, then continued, gesturing across the room with a sweep of his front hoof. “The bag of flour went clear through this room, out that door and into the shop proper, and got poor Derpy Hooves right over the head. That mare always seems to catch the worst of things, somehow... Anyway, she just gets *covered* in flour, then she stumbles in here looking like a ghost-pegasus, and scares the dickens out of my wife, Cup Cake. And Cup Cake, she’s a kicker when she’s startled!” The baker laughed, looking off into the distance. “Well, anyway. So she kicks, and the table leg is right behind her. The next thing ya know, the table is broken, Cup Cake is covered in the tea and cookies she’d spent all morning laying out for the three of us, I’m still on the floor with Pinkie on my back and Gummy clamped onto my nose, and poor Derpy is trying to apologize, but she just can’t stop coughing flour!” Carrot Cake sighed, shaking his head and grinning. “Well, we laughed up a storm about it the other night, but I tell ya, Cup Cake was *not* happy right then.”

“I’ll bet,” Lapis said, laughing in amazement - then, the grin froze on his face as a possibility occurred to him. “Wait, Pinkie doesn’t work here, does she?”

“Yep, and she lives here, too! You’ve already met her, I bet,” Carrot Cake said. “Even with all the parties she’s always running, she still cooks almost all the cupcakes we sell. Ooh, here, I’ll get you one - on the house!”

“Oh, no, I couldn’t,” Lapis began, but Carrot Cake had already leaned into the kitchen and grabbed one for him.

“I insist,” Carrot Cake said, offering it atop one of his hooves. “If Pinkie were here, she’d be giving ya a whole dozen. She’s out right now - looking for some new pony in town, if I remember right. She always throws the nicest parties for newcomers... But I’m rambling again. Here, take your cupcake, or I’ll forget I’m holding it!”

Lapis levitated the cupcake, torn between bemusement about the baker’s Rube-Goldberg machine of a story, and panic about Pinkie Pie’s continued hunt for him. “Thanks, it looks delicious. Uh, all newcomers? No exceptions, ever?”

“Every single one!” Carrot Cake said, beaming. “Usually the night they arrive. She’s been in a bit of a rush lately, now that I think about it - I think she hadn’t managed to track this pony down in time, and now she wanted to throw an extra-big party to make up for it. Ooh, I’d better start making a cake!” He glanced back towards the kitchen.

“Well, I’d better clear out of your way, then,” Lapis replied. “Hate to keep the lucky pony waiting!”

“Oh, I betcha!” Carrot Cake chuckled, then turned and re-entered the kitchen. “Here, let me get those bits for ya. Now, where did I leave that bag...”

Lapis did his best to tune out the sound of Carrot Cake rummaging around in the pantry, instead straining his ears to listen for any early warning of Pinkie. The *sproing, sproing, sproing* of her hoofsteps, a knock on the door, anything that might give him a second or two to react. Almost absent-mindedly, Lapis reached into his saddlebag with his magic, trying to get a good grip on his mask -

- It wasn’t there.

Oh, shit.

“...And here we are!” Carrot Cake said, re-emerging from the kitchen with a small stack of coins balanced on his hoof. He blinked in surprise at the

sight of Lapis. “-Oh, dear. Pinkie didn’t get you with another bag of flour, did she?”

“What? No!” Lapis said, waving his hooves. “No, I- just realized I forgot my money-bag. ...Did I really go that pale?”

“Almost!” Carrot Cake chimed, setting the stack of bits on the table. “Well, I hope your saddlebags don’t have any holes. Here, I might have a patch lying around if you need one...”

“No, they’re just fine,” Lapis said, quickly levitating the coins into his bag and turning toward the door. “Thanks for your time, Mr. Cake. And also for the cupcake, but I’d really better get out of here if I want to hunt down my money-bag.”

“Oh, of course. Come back anytime, you’ve been great conversation!”

“I’ll be sure to stop by!” Lapis replied over his shoulder, plastering a smile on his face and making his way out the door toward the front of the shop. He was halfway across the storefront to the exit by the time he heard another door in the building slowly creak open.

Please don’t, Lapis thought, advancing toward the door as stealthily as he could. *Please*.

“SHHH!” another, higher voice hissed from deep inside the house. Lapis hesitated, just for a second. What? Who’s shushing-

“Oh!” Mr. Cake’s voice yelped from further inside the building. “Goodness, Pinkie Pie, sometimes you’re so quiet-”

Lapis didn’t stick around to hear the rest. He bolted, heading for the front door as fast as his hooves could carry him. And the sound that began to echo from inside the kitchen was the exact same noise he’d expected to hear, the *sproing, sproing, sproing*, of Pinkie’s hoofsteps, but the time between them was at least two or three times shorter than usual.

A high-pitched scream rang in Lapis' ears as he passed through the doorway, and he wasn't sure whether the voice was Pinkie's or his. He gripped the doorframe with a hoof and used it to hang a right, skidding briefly on the flagstone before taking off down the road at a gallop. *Mask, mask, where's my mask, dammit?! If it's just in my other saddlebag-*

Lapis leaped sideways into an alleyway, narrowly missing a confused pedestrian, just as he heard Sugarcube Corner's door swing slowly open. He got halfway down the alley before ducking behind a trash can - then, to his surprise, he ended up collapsing with his back against the bin, suddenly gasping and panting for breath. *What... the hell? I was... way better at running than this, have I let myself go or something?*

As quietly as he could, Lapis started rummaging around his other saddlebag, checking for any sign of the mask, but found that all he had was a stack of order slips and a pencil. Maybe he'd messed up. Maybe his mas was in his first saddlebag, and he'd missed it earlier -

Sproing. Sproing. Sproing.

Lapis felt his eyes widen, felt his heart slow in his chest as the sound of Pinkie's approach began to echo down the alleyway. *Shit! Do I run? There's nowhere to turn, I'll lose hands-down in a straight race!*

Lapis knew his mask wasn't in his saddlebag, he always kept it in the same place - had he left it in his house somewhere, or had it fallen out? Whatever the case, Pinkie was approaching his hiding place, and as soon as she reached it, he was basically done.

This, Lapis thought, as Pinkie's steps grew ever closer, might be it. May as well face it like a man. He took a slow, deep breath, as quietly as he could, and did his best to compose himself, opening his eyes to take in his surroundings.

...Wait. I know this alleyway! He was right next to the Corner Cafe - if he was lucky, then there might be a back entrance.

Forget luck, Lapis thought, setting his jaw. This is the only shot I have. Either it works, or nothing will. He took another breath, his heart beginning to pound in his chest. *Please, please, please-!*

He lunged forward, ducking under an open window and sidestepping another trash can, and the only thing that stopped him from grinning at the sight of the side entrance was the squeaky-voiced “Ah-ha!” that came from somewhere behind him.

Lapis whipped open the entrance and rushed inside, yanking the door shut behind himself and hurrying toward the first door that looked like it led into the restaurant proper. He shouldered it open, glancing around the restaurant, and had a double-take when he saw Lyra and Bon Bon already sitting in one of the booths. He spotted the waitress bringing Bon Bon a stack of syrup-drenched pancakes, topped with a curved strip of hay-bacon and a pair of cherries atop dollops of whipped cream, so that the pancake looked like it had a smiley face. And all at once, he had the single most insane idea he’d ever had in his life.

As quickly and casually as he could, Lapis hurried toward the pair of ponies. Lyra spotted him first and shot him a friendly wave, but her expression grew confused as he hurried over and sat down beside Bon Bon.

“What are you-” Bon Bon began saying as the door to the Corner Cafe jingled open and the first *sproing* rang through the building. Lapis didn’t reply - he levitated the top pancake off of Bon Bon’s stack, hay-bacon, cherries and all. Then he flipped it around so that the smiley face was facing away from himself, and pressed the syrup-dripping pancake against his face, spearing it on his horn with a moist squelch.

The syrup instantly saturated his face, gluing itself to his fur as firmly as it held the hay-bacon and other toppings in place. Lapis strained his ears as the sound of Pinkie’s hoofsteps approached his table, passed by... then began to approach again.

“Hey, has anypony seen a really fast, baby-bluey blur around here?” Pinkie asked.

There were a few seconds of silence. "...Nope," Lyra wheezed.

Pinkie huffed. "Well, if anypony sees that blur, let me know. I owe it three nice-to-meet-you's, two dozen cupcakes, and a whole half-month's worth of party!" There was a sudden rush of air, and Lapis felt his mane ruffle in the exact same moment that the door to the Corner Cafe suddenly closed.

Lapis waited until a count of ten before he pulled his impromptu mask off his face. There were strings of syrup that connected his forehead and muzzle to the pancake, and Lapis winced as he watched them drip down onto the table, gingerly returning the pancake to Bon Bon's plate.

"Lapis?" Bon Bon asked, her tone perfectly calm. "What the buck?"

Lyra snorted, then fell sideways on her bench as she broke into hysterical laughter. Lapis sighed, grabbing a napkin and scrubbing off his horn. "I don't even know, anymore."

A few minutes later, Lapis had bought Bon Bon another stack of pancakes, and was tucking into a small plate of scrambled eggs with veggies and cheese. Lyra had mostly gotten control of herself again, though every so often she would glance at Lapis' face, the fur of which was still matted with syrup, and giggle. Bon Bon, meanwhile, was trying to hold the exact conversation that Lapis was least keen on having just then.

"...But is it really worth it?" she was saying. "Lapis, I'm not exactly a party pony myself, but you have to see that avoiding Pinkie is getting to be more trouble for you than whatever hosting her party would've been!"

"What it would've been, maybe," Lapis said, rubbing his forehead with a free hoof. *This'll take forever to wash out... I wish they had Goo-Gone here.* "But not what it *will* be. I just came here from Sugarcube Corner, had to fix a table for Mr. Cake. He said that if Pinkie finds out who I am, or where I live, she's going to make up for lost time by throwing an extra-big party."

“Well, that’s all the more reason for you to make first contact *now!*” Lyra said, waving a hoof. “The longer you go without introducing yourself to Pinkie, the crazier the party is going to get. Why in Equestria are you so keen on not talking to Pinkie in the first place, anyway?”

Because I’m an alien from another planet who’s seen the future of this world, I know that Pinkie, Twilight, and the rest of her friends are doomed to get into ten times more trouble on a regular basis than everyone else in Ponyville put together, and I’d bet every last bit I own that - if I got involved with them - I’d get swept up into a lot more of their trouble than I’d like. Which is a problem because I need to get back to my home as soon as I possibly can, on account of the fact that I’ve probably put my family in more debt than they can pay off by being dumb enough to disappear under mysterious circumstances, and the fact that that debt will only continue to increase the longer I’m gone. Ergo, I need to waste as little time as possible, or else.

“Because... I just am, okay?” Lapis said. “I meant to mention this to you earlier, Lyra, but it’s not because I’m embarrassed about my house or anything. Parties are just... Look, have you ever spilled a bag of glitter or something in your saddlebags?”

Bon Bon cocked a confused eyebrow, but Lyra nodded, so Lapis pushed on. “How long did it take before you could put anything in those saddlebags, and not have them come out covered in glitter?”

Lyra hesitated, tapping her chin with a hoof. “...You know, I think stuff *still* comes out of my saddlebags with glitter on it every so often.”

“Exactly,” Lapis said. “Confetti’s the same way, if there’s enough of it. Now, let me ask you this: what happens to confetti when it gets wet?”

“It goes soggy?” Bon Bon asked, her eyebrow still cocked.

“Yep. And what happens to the dye?”

“...Ooooh, I get it,” Lyra said.

Bon Bon glanced over at her. “So? You ask a unicorn who knows cleaning spells to take care of the stain.”

“Well, yeah, but I don’t know cleaning spells, and I don’t really know many unicorns that do,” Lyra pointed out. “The same goes for Lapis, I’m guessing... Oh, have you picked up those books I recommended for you yet?”

...Man, it’s just one bad topic after another, huh? “No,” Lapis sighed, “I haven’t. I’m not exactly... comfortable going into the library at the moment. I checked out four books from there - one was the book about the Elements of Harmony, but the other three were about some more specific types of magic. Problem is, apparently I didn’t check them out right, and now Twilight’s put up a whole poster saying that somepony owes a hundred and fifty bits in fees-”

Bon Bon’s eyebrows shot up, and Lyra nearly stood upright in her seat. “A hundred and fifty!?”

“Per book,” Lapis finished, and Lyra sat back in her seat, her jaw dropping. Bon Bon, meanwhile, slowly shook her head. “Sounds like the standard fine levied for petty theft... and if Twilight’s treating mishtoofing of library books as a crime, then that might warrant sending a letter to the Mayor’s office. They’re the ones responsible for laying down the law, not librarians.”

“...But what about students to Princess Celestia?” Lyra asked. Bon Bon raised a hoof, opening her mouth to object- then paused, frowning and lowering her hoof.

“Exactly,” Lapis said, swallowing the last forkful of his eggs. “And considering that Twilight’s on pretty good terms with Pinkie, this all works out to be one more reason not to let Pinkie find me. Speaking of which, I’d better head back to my shop. Find my mask, wash the syrup out of my coat, look up the nearest bookstore, y’know.”

Lyra snickered again, then cleared her throat. “Right, yeah. Um, hey, Lapis?”

Lapis paused. "Uh, yeah?"

"You know you can talk to us, right?" Lyra waved a hoof at herself and Bon Bon, who nodded. "If there's stuff going on, we're happy to hear about it."

No, Lapis thought, *I can't*. He smiled anyway, and found to his surprise that he meant the gratitude he was trying to convey. "Thanks, Lyra. That means a lot. And you too, Bon Bon."

"Anytime," Bon Bon replied. "Now go wash up, quick, before that syrup hardens."

Lapis grinned, then made for the door, pausing only briefly to glance up and down the street for any sign of Pinkie. Then, he hurried on his way.

The mask, as it turned out, was on the floor just inside the shop's front door. As best as Lapis could tell, it had slipped out when he'd slung his saddlebags over his shoulder that morning. Lapis took a few seconds to remove one of the smaller coat-hooks from his doorframe, bolting it instead to the inside of his bag. Then, he tied the mask's strap to the hook in a quick slip-knot before washing the syrup out of his face and heading back out.

Clumsy? Yes. Overkill? Absolutely. But with any luck...

Nope. If I think that out loud, I'll jinx it.

The rest of the day was busy, but otherwise uneventful. Lapis managed to get to bed early, which was good, because the star-bear did, in fact, arrive that evening.

Lapis was *sound* asleep, and the giant star-bear's first footstep had still rattled him right out of bed. He wandered out of his home, bleary-eyed and blinking, and stopped dead in his tracks at the sight of the thing.

In short, it was a bear the size of a blimp, with a deep-blue, translucent coat that twinkled with false stars. It raised its forepaw, and Lapis saw the air that the thing displaced ruffle the manes of the ponies cowering before it, Trixie among them - but, to Lapis' relief, the monster didn't swipe at them. Instead, with a gesture like opening a pair of finger-scissors, it snapped a rope that had been tying two of its toes together.

Trixie seemed to have done her best to stop the creature - and her best, it seemed, wasn't nearly good enough. Lapis had sat down on his porch in a state of shock, his mindset shifting into a bizarre calm as he tried to figure out which portion of the town would be quickest to rebuild.

Then Twilight stepped out of her library, visibly nervous but determined. Her horn flared with the translucent, almost gel-like coating of her magic, and after a few moments, the bear swayed and began to look drowsy, almost drunk. And, for a brief, blissful moment, Lapis had thought that he wouldn't have anything unusual to attend to the next day.

Then a second coat of magic wrapped around Twilight's horn, and *the entire top of Ponyville's water tower* casually tore itself free of its wooden supports with no more ceremony than a wet, crackling crunch. Lapis knew that kind of crunching noise all too well: it was the sound of old lumber turning into new mulch, and it was bad news for his ability to get much rest tomorrow.

The problem only got worse when it became clear that Twilight wasn't planning on keeping the top of the water tower. Lapis made a deliberate point of not thinking about how Twilight had milked all those cows so quickly, but he couldn't stop himself from wondering what kind of magical strength she had to possess in order to lift the entire star-bear, with milk-filled water tower, and then carry it all the way back into the Everfree.

Only once the star-bear was well out of sight did Twilight's horn finally go dark, Twilight almost collapsing from the exertion. After that, it wasn't long until the rest of the town erupted in cheers, and the blue showmare excused herself with a few parting shouts, a smoke bomb, and an impressively fast gallop. None of the ponies seemed particularly to mind that they were now sans-water tower, nor were any of them particularly bothered by the fact that there had just been a blimp-sized ursine casually wandering into Ponyville. Instead, they were all cheering on the mare who had saved the day: Twilight Sparkle, protege to the Princess and legal custodian of the three unreturned library books which sat, quiet and waiting, in the basement of Lapis' house.

...Huh. Here I'd thought that Nightmare Moon was the scariest thing that could happen to Ponyville, but yeah, nope. And neither was the star-bear,

not by a long way - for Lapis, the most terrifying presence in Ponyville had just become Twilight McBookface Sparkle.

I gotta do something about those library books.

Or maybe...

When Lapis woke up the next morning, it was with a goal in mind. He needed to get the library books back into Twilight's collection as soon as possible - but, he also needed to do it in such a way that Twilight didn't see him, and her exorbitant overdue-book fines were paid in full, or otherwise dealt with.

At this point, it's pretty clear that if Twilight actually wants to hunt me down, she probably can. The only thing I can do to stop her from doing so, Lapis thought, setting his jaw as he clambered out of bed, is to make sure she doesn't have a reason to hunt me down. And that means I either need to pay those fines, or find some other way to make them disappear.

Unfortunately, coming up with the goal was one thing, and coming up with a plan that accomplished that goal was another. And if there was one thing Lapis knew about planning, it was that planning was very much an after-coffee task. So, yawning, he wandered out into the front room, grinning drowsily as he stepped across the woolen rug on the floor and sat in his chair by the window.

Lapis had woken up late today, but it looked like he wasn't the only one - there were a fair number of pedestrians out and about with their manes still messy, and fewer of them in total than what was normal. *Huh. Wonder if the Corner Cafe's open yet... actually, if the sun's this high, it might be...*

He glanced toward his kitchen, briefly running through the steps it would take to whip himself up some coffee and an omelet. *I could have it done in no time flat... but not today. I can have an off-day, every once in a while.*

Nodding, Lapis stood up, slung his saddlebags over his back, and set off for the Corner Cafe, hanging a ‘Temporarily Closed’ sign on his door. *Besides, if Lyra and Bon Bon are there, it’ll give me a chance to bounce some ideas off of Lyra and Bon Bon. And if they’re not... well, I get to enjoy a good breakfast without making it myself, then I find Nikki, and then I find out where to buy myself a cloak with a hood.*

The dirt streets of Ponyville in the late morning were a little quieter than usual, but not by much. There were still plenty of ponies out and about, grouped together in twos and threes, the pastels of their coats reminiscent of the clothes of a human crowd. If Lapis closed his eyes, he could almost pretend he was back on campus - their voices were human, the topics of conversation familiar, their tones friendly, excited, warm...

“...so then she passed me the muffin, and I was like...”

“...I told her not to bug the poor mare, but you know Yellow Petal...”

“...did you see this year’s batch?! I think they might be the best Ponyville’s ever seen - I can’t wait for the cider!”

-and then Lapis opened his eyes, and he was back in Ponyville again, inside a world that was almost literally made to appeal to his seven-year-old little sister. *Man, what she’d give to be here instead of me...*

Something in his chest ached, just for a moment. *Right. Focus.*

Lapis blinked, shook his head, and started keeping an eye out for any of the main characters, doing his best to tune out the growing warmth of the summer morning. Luckily, it seemed he was in the clear until Pinkie decided to show up - for some reason, Rainbow wasn’t usually in the sky before about 10:00, Twilight was almost never out of her library at all, and Lapis had yet to see Applejack outside the Apple family farm- well, except for the Bunny Incident.

That left Rarity and Fluttershy, and as far as Lapis could tell, both of them were non-issues. Lapis was a lot of things, but “picky about clothes” wasn’t

one of them, especially given that he was wearing a fur coat 24/7 - so he had no reason to visit Rarity's clothing shop, and she was apparently kept busy enough by her own orders that she had no time to wander around and potentially spot him. And Fluttershy...

Lapis slowed momentarily, frowning. *Fluttershy. Huh. You know, I don't think I've seen her at all since the Summer Sun Celebration. Wonder what she gets up to...*

As casually as he could, Lapis scanned the streets around him for any sign of Fluttershy, but didn't catch so much as a glimpse of her. *Well, whatever she does, I guess she's not doing it around me. So... I guess that's not a problem, yet?*

When Lapis arrived at the Corner Cafe, one glance through the window confirmed that Lyra and Bon Bon weren't there. He stopped inside just long enough to get an omelet and some fries in a to-go bag, then headed back to his shop, only pausing inside for just long enough to hang his saddlebags by the door. Then, he headed straight into his closet, made his way into the basement, and cracked open what he deemed to be the most potentially important of his three books - *The Horn is Quicker than the Carriage: Transportation for the Time-Pressed Unicorn*. He quickly flipped to the chapter about teleportation spells, and stared glumly down at the imposing wall of magical terminology that waited on its first page.

This, Lapis thought, is going to suck.

Then, grimacing, he pulled over the notebook left behind by the previous owner of the workshop, levitated an inkwell and quill over from the corner of the workbench, and began to copy down the chapter.

Priority one was simple: return the library books, and pay off the fines. Unfortunately, Lapis hadn't checked out these books for entertainment purposes - a lot of the information in them would likely be helpful stuff, on the off-chance he figured out how to understand any of it. So, he needed to return the books, but keep the information in them - and until he managed

to figure out enough magical terminology to decipher the texts, the best he could do was to copy them down. By hand... or, well, by horn.

Over the next hour, Lapis learned a few things about writing with an inkwell and quill. Lesson one was that the ink would blot the page if you left the quill in one spot for too long, while lessons two and three were that moving the quill too quickly would either leave a trail of ink too thin to easily read, or else simply puncture the paper. On top of that, the quill would manage to write down an average of five words before it needed dipped in the inkwell again - seven if they were shorter words, and three if they were long.

All in all, by the time Lapis finished copying down the chapter, he was about ready to crumple the quill into a ball and stomp on it. *You know what? As far as The Totaled Theories of Harmonick Resonance goes, I think I've got Mend-Alls pretty much under control. And as thematically appropriate as it would be to copy down a book written in Ye Olde Shakespearean Englishe by way of a quill, I think I'd rather jump into a barrel of gasoline with a lit match.*

Having made up his mind, Lapis levitated *The Totaled Theories* and *The Horn is Quicker* up off the workbench, and went back upstairs to return them to his saddlebags. He opened the closet door, walked past the disorganized pile of pencils sitting atop the counter, returned the books to his saddlebags-

Wait.

Lapis slowly, creakily turned his head, making sure he'd seen what he thought he'd seen. Sure enough, sitting there on top of his counter were about a half-dozen perfectly serviceable charcoal pencils, complete with pink rubber erasers.

Lapis' eyelid twitched. He shut his eyes, taking a slow, deep breath, and did his best to suppress the scream of frustration that was trying to worm its way from his throat.

Can I please, he thought, do one thing without making a stupid mistake that ends up costing me twice as much time as it needs to?! First it's The

Reference Guide, then it's not managing to copy down the right words from that magical glossary, and now this?!

“I need,” Lapis muttered, “to get this mess under control.”

A sudden, brief series of quiet scraping noises shattered Lapis’ composure, and he snapped his eyes open to stare around the room, looking for the source of the noise. But to his increased exasperation, he couldn’t see anything different. *And now there’s mice or something in my roof. Great. Just great.*

Lapis groaned, then levitated the top pencil off the stack on his desk and hurried back into his closet, keen to finish copying down the chapters on invisibility and disguise from his last book as quickly as possible. And as he shut the door, it only slightly rattled the perfectly-aligned, pyramidal stack of pencils that, only a few moments before, had been a disorganized, scattered pile.

By the time Lapis finished copying down the most relevant-seeming sections of *Shape-Shifting and Other Ways of Escaping the Sordid*, it was noon. *I didn’t mean to take a day off, but... well, I guess I have, huh?*

There were, as it turned out, a few clothing shops in Ponyville besides the Carousel Boutique. One of them, the *Stallion’s Saddlebag Store*, sold simple brown waxed-canvas “rain-cloaks” in a whole variety of sizes, which luckily included Lapis’. Since it was summer, all the winter wear was discounted, so Lapis also bought himself a dark blue scarf and a matching beanie. *Winter probably won’t be for a while yet, but it pays to be prepared.*

Lapis returned to his shop to stow away his purchases, then sat back at his table and tried to plan his next move. *Given that my ‘disguise’ is a rain-cloak, I’d probably better wait until the next time it rains to wear it, or else I might as well just wear a sign that says “up to no good.”* He glanced out the window at the sky, and was pleasantly surprised to see a large group of pegasi pushing bundles of heavy gray clouds into the sky. *Huh. Guess I’m in luck.*

Somepony knocked on his door, and Lapis frowned, peeking at the window.
Wonder who that could be... It's the Mayor? Wonder what she's here for... Oh yeah, right.

Lapis wandered over to the door and pulled it open. "Afternoon, Ms. Mayor. Is this about the water tower?"

"It's about the water tower," Mayor Mare confirmed, nodding as she stepped inside. She was dressed in her standard attire - a plain white collar that looked like it belonged on a dress shirt, held in place by a puffy cyan ascot. "That was Ponyville's main stockpile of fresh water, and it's gone. I've got some pegasi bringing in a downpour right now, just to make sure everypony's lawns are watered and their rain barrels are full for the next few days, but that water tower still needs to get fixed as soon as it possibly can. Luckily, the dimensions were on file, so we were able to place an order with the smith-ponies down near the Big Apple. They should have the sections for a new container built in a few days, but in the meantime... well, in the meantime, we need to make sure the support struts are stable enough to support the new container."

Lapis shook his head. "I haven't gotten the chance to check it out yet, but I'd be willing to bet the tops of those struts are more like mulch than timber at the moment. Are there any professional carpenter-ponies in Ponyville?"

"Oh, yes, there's a group of them, but, well..." Mayor Mare grimaced and waved a hoof, her ears flopping back a little. "They aren't cheap, and they certainly aren't fast, either. I can't imagine harvesting timber from the Everfree is a quick-and-easy prospect, but still, I'd much prefer to pay for your services than for theirs, if that's at all possible."

Lapis nodded, grabbing his saddlebags from the side of the door. "Yeah, I've honestly been expecting something like this ever since last night. I'll take a look, and drop by Town Hall tomorrow to tell you what I find, but I can't promise you'll like what I find out."

"Your expert opinion is all I ask," Mayor Mare replied, smiling. "Oh, and of course I'm not asking you to do this for free. On paper, this is getting

recorded as a consultation, so... here's your consultation fee." She reached into her saddlebags, then produced a hefty sack of bits.

Lapis picked it up with his magic, blinking in surprise at the weight of the sack. "That should be more than enough. There's a couple of things I'd like to wrap up around here first, but I'll probably head out pretty soon after."

"Oh, of course! Don't let me get in the way!" Mayor Mare chuckled, then headed out. "I'll see you tomorrow!"

"See you then!" Lapis replied, shutting the door behind her. He waited a few seconds, then pumped his hoof. *This is perfect. The weather's right for me to wear the rain-cloak, visibility will be poor enough that Twilight will have a hard time seeing me, and I even have an alibi!*

Grinning, he grabbed the rain-cloak out of the closet and slung it onto himself over top of his saddlebags. It was a little big, but that was intentional - with the hood up, it was impossible to tell what Lapis looked like, unless you managed to glance under the hood. *All I gotta do is check out the water tower until it starts raining, then drop by the Golden Oak and hide the books somewhere inside. When Twilight or whoever else finds them, she'll think they were just misplaced or misfiled or something instead of stolen, and presto! Charges dropped, fees forgiven, and I've gotten off scot-free.*

Lapis tied the collar of the cloak shut around his neck, leaving the hood down for the time being, and set off for the water tower.

The water tower, it turned out, was a fairly isolated spot in comparison to the rest of Ponyville. It was near the cattle barn, but there weren't many other buildings nearby - most of that space was taken up by trees with dark, dense foliage.

It took Lapis a while to find a ladder up to the water tower, but once he did, it turned out that the structure was in much better shape than he'd thought. The basic shape of the structure was like a platter atop a wooden stand, with the actual water container mounted atop the platter. The stand of the

structure was fine, and the platter was sturdy, if weathered. But on top of that platter was a short, thick wooden ring that had likely been used to brace the container still atop the tower, and *that* was splintered beyond repair.

Or beyond repair that'll take less than a day or two, anyway, Lapis thought. The force of Twilight's magic lifting the container free had more than just broken or torn the wood - it had shattered, almost like a tree struck by lightning. It reminded Lapis of when Bon Bon had jumped through his window, except this time there was no Princess Celestia to make everything better again for the apparent fun of it.

A fat, heavy raindrop caught Lapis right on the tip of his muzzle, and he blinked in surprise, then quickly put his hood up as he checked the skies. The pegasi had done their job, and now the entirety of Ponyville's sky was covered by a gloomy gray blanket of rainclouds. The rain was starting to come down, now, and from the top of the water tower Lapis could see the last few denizens of Ponyville hurrying indoors.

Lapis wasted no time getting down the ladder to the water tower, and toward the Golden Oak. Normally, you wouldn't catch him high up anywhere in the first place, especially not when the weather was this bad - as far as he was concerned, that was basically asking to get struck by lightning. But since the weather in Equestria seemed, for the most part, to be artificial, he'd guessed that there was enough of a difference between a rain-cloud and a storm-cloud that pegasi could choose to put one in the sky, and not the other.

Still, Lapis thought, climbing that ladder in the rain, without fingers, isn't exactly the safest thing in the world either. He was within sight of the Golden Oak now, and the downpour had begun in earnest, the rain beating down on the streets in sheets, and kneading the dirt roads of Ponyville into dense, slick coats of sucking mud. Lapis was glad he didn't need to worry about wet socks, but even still, he'd need a good, long shower once he got back to his shop - his hooves were filthy already.

Lapis paused under the archway, trying to work out his plan of attack. He hadn't been able to find Nikki in time, and even if she were here, Lapis

sincerely doubted she could fly in this rain. Right now, he was basically going in blind.

So, he thought, walking toward the library as casually as he could, *that's what I'll need to fix first. I'll peek through the window, see if Twilight's in there, and if she's not... well, I'll stuff the books behind some other books on the shelves, and that'll be that.*

Lapis picked a window - the small one on the front door of the building - and started forward, raising his head to peek through. He set his hoof on the doorstep, then paused as he noticed the stone beneath his hoof was a different color than usual. *Huh. Was that always purple, or-*

Lightning struck right beside him, and Lapis yelped, tucking into a roll as he dove away from the site of impact. Mud splattered across his cloak and face, and Lapis wiped it off his eyes as quickly as he could.

“Oh, my!” a voice said. “I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean to startle you! Are you alright?”

“Doing great,” Lapis replied, looking up. “Thanks for ask-” ...*Oh, shit.*

“That’s a relief. I only teleported down because my Bag-Checking Charm found my missing library books in your saddlebags, and I guess I got a little overexcited to check them back in... Wait, what’s the matter?” Twilight asked, cocking her head and blinking in confusion, a dome of purplish light hanging over her head like an umbrella. “And why are you dressed like that?”

“Uh...” Lapis said. “Because it’s raining!”

“Well, why not just use an Umbrella Spell?” Twilight asked, cocking an eyebrow.

“...I never learned?”

“But *everypony* learns an Umbrella Spell,” Twilight replied, squinting. “With that cloak, I’d almost think you were up to no good... Wait a minute! You’re the pony who stole the library books, aren’t you?!”

Shit! “Whoa-whoa-whoa, I didn’t *steal* anything! I just borrowed these books before you showed up in the building, and now I’m looking to put them back. That’s all.”

“Uh-huh. Then how come the Bag-Checking charm didn’t find any bits in your bag?” Twilight asked, tucking her ears back as Lapis retreated before her advance. “If you just wanted to return them, then you *must’ve* known there were fines on those books. And why don’t you have a library account, either?! If you were just ‘borrowing’ those books, then they would’ve been filed under a library account- hey, wait! Get back here!”

Lapis wasn’t sure when he’d started galloping away, but now that he’d started, stopping seemed like a worse idea by the second. His thought process was a continuous stream of swearing as he sprinted away from the library, Twilight’s mud-splattering hoofsteps quickening to a gallop behind him. Lapis slipped and nearly fell as he hung a right, and his eyes widened as he saw that his path was blocked by a stack of barrels. He steered around them, then hurried down the road as quickly as he could-

There was a muffled *whump*, and Lapis felt his eardrums pop as the air pressure shifted around him. Then, to his terror, a number of the barrels he’d just ran past went flying over his head, catapulted into the sky by what Lapis knew had to be Twilight’s spell. *Holy-!*

No time to gawk! Lapis snapped his head back to the road again, and saw that it grew narrower ahead, the edges blocked by a pair of wagons, buried up to their spokes in the mud. *Okay. Choke point. Maybe I can block it, buy myself some time-*

Swallowing, Lapis snatched one of the barrels out of the air, his own brown magic wrapping around its sides. Then, he pulled it back toward himself, gritting his teeth as his horn stung with the effort. He stood it upright between the two wagons, then pressed it into the mud by about two inches - not deep enough to jump over, but deep enough that it’d be a pain to move.

He did the same with another barrel, and then two more at once on the other side of the street. He got a telekinetic grasp on the last barrel just before he passed through the narrow opening in his blockade, and slammed it into place behind him.

“Oh!” he heard Twilight groan in frustration. Lapis didn’t grin - he had no doubt that Twilight would find a way past the barrels soon, he needed to come up with a new plan. *I gotta either get her to lose track of me, or just evade her until she runs outta steam. Maybe if I turn into this alley, she won’t get over the barrels until I’m out of sight...*

Lapis turned left just as another flash of purple light erupted from the other side of the barrels, and Twilight reappeared on his side of the barricade, in front of it by about ten feet. She stumbled, swaying a little - then shook her head clear and started chasing after Lapis again. *Well, there goes that plan - Whoa!*

Vines were sprouting out of the mud in front of Lapis, trying to wrap themselves around his hooves like tentacles as he ran across them. They got longer and longer as he stared, terrified, down the alley, looking for a way around - but there were only the walls of the buildings to either side. The wall to his left had trash cans, but the right wall was bare brick and mortar - *please, please please let this work with hooves-!*

Lapis veered left, then sprinted forward and to the right - and in the moment just before he hit the right wall, he jumped, sprinting forward across the wall, praying that his momentum would hold until he got over the patch of vines. Then Lapis ran out of wall, yelping as he fell forward and sideways-

He landed with a heavy thud on his left side, his head slapping into the mud with a thick squelch. *And now my saddlebags need washed, too.* Groaning, Lapis hauled himself to his hooves, then kept moving forward, turning his head to the side as he charged through a thick patch of trees, the signature purple flash of Twilight’s teleport behind him only spurring him on. *New plan, new plan, come on...*

Lapis glimpsed a familiar-looking ladder ahead and to his right, and suddenly realized where he was. *Okay, that’s crazy, but it’s better than*

nothing. Let's do it. Grimacing, Lapis ran to the side of the water tower, hunching his head against the pouring rain as he climbed.

In a few seconds that took minutes, he reached the top, and pulled the ladder up behind him just before Twilight emerged, huffing and puffing, from the treeline, the Umbrella Spell still hanging over her head. Lapis hadn't realized until then just how out-of-breath he was, and suddenly it was all he could do not to collapse over the edge of the water tower's platter.

"Is he... part goat or something?" Twilight panted, staring around herself almost frantically for any sign of Lapis. Then she frowned, before slowly looking up.

Lapis pulled himself away from the edge, straining to hear anything over the roar of the pouring rain. *Please. Please. Just let me be done. Please.*

"You know I can see the ends of the ladder from down here, right?" Twilight called up.

Oh for fuck's sake. Lapis looked at the ladder, and sure enough, it was too big to fit entirely on the water tower's "platter" - several rungs' worth stuck off at either end.

"Don't make me come up there!" Twilight called back again. "The longer you're out in the rain, the more likely those books are to get damaged!"

...Yeah, the mud's probably ruined them. Or... Oh, wait, no, I kept them in my other saddlebag. They're good.

I think.

Twilight huffed. "Fine! I'm getting a ladder, and when I come back, it'll be with backup!"

The sound of stomping hoofsteps echoed up to Lapis' ears. Carefully, he peeked back over the side, and saw that Twilight was indeed marching back toward the rest of Ponyville. *Okay. Okay, now's my chance.*

Carefully, as quietly as he could, Lapis levitated the ladder off the edge of the platter, braced it up against the side, and climbed onto the top few rungs. Then, after double-checking to make sure Twilight was gone, Lapis started to slide down the ladder, ignoring the pop as the wooden structure shifted in the wind-

Except Lapis wasn't going down. He was sliding down the glowing-purple ladder, alright, but he was still going up, back over the side of the platter, where Twilight was waiting with a smug grin, her mane and coat bone-dry thanks to the Umbrella Spell still hanging over her head.

"Now," she said, "let's try that conversation again."

And that was when Lapis ran out of ladder, and the ground rushed up to meet him-

"Whoooaaa-!"

"Oh no-!"

The ladder slid into place beneath him out of nowhere, still glowing purple as Lapis hit it, and suddenly everything went dark-

"...Ow," Lapis wheezed. "Oh, everything hurts..."

He was on the ground, the ladder broken beneath him, his impact cartoonishly imprinted into the mud around him. Lapis didn't stop to question his survival. Instead, he stumbled into the trees as quickly as he could, but he tripped on a root and fell over again only ten feet past the treeline.

Grimacing, he sat back up, trying to shake the fog out of his head and looking back at the water tower, squinting and shielding his eyes from the rain with one hoof. Twilight was trying to lift the broken pieces of the ladder out of the mud, gritting her teeth and straining as they trembled a few inches above the ground - but as he watched, the coating of her purple

magic on the ladder's parts flickered, then vanished entirely. A few seconds later, the Umbrella Spell above Twilight's head disappeared with a crackling hiss, Twilight yelping as sparks shot off her horn.

Is she... outta juice? She's outta juice.

...I got away.

Lapis hauled himself onto his hooves, grimacing as a jolt of pain shot through his knees, then turned to leave...

“...Help!”

Lapis froze, frowning and shutting his eyes, his ears tucking back inside his hood. “Don’t say that,” he muttered. Then, he turned back around to look.

Twilight had huddled down on top of the platter, but Lapis could still see that she was absolutely drenched, howling gusts of wind chilling the sheets of rain even further as they pounded down on her. She was shivering, and as Lapis watched, her horn flickered with magic - then sparks shot off it as she grunted again, her tank still as empty as it had been a few moments before.

“Help,” she called again, her voice less certain this time. “Anypony?”

Cold. Oh, that's cold.

Twilight was shivering so much, she almost didn't feel the *thump* beneath her hooves. She wrenched her eyes open, and for a second she couldn't believe what she was seeing.

It was the top few rungs of the ladder, gripped in a coat of telekinetic magic that was either almost invisible, or else just matched the brownish color of the ladder's wood almost perfectly. As she watched, the ladder shifted, then settled against the ground below with a solid, reassuring thunk.

“Oh, thank Celestia,” she muttered, slowly heaving herself to her hooves. They were still shivering, and Twilight tried again to cast her Heart-Warming spell, wincing as her horn sparked again with mana-burn. *Really,*

Twilight? Three teleportation spells in a ROW, the night after you horn-pressed an Ursa Minor and a water tower full of milk? You're not Celestia, you know. You have limits.

Twilight continued to shiver as she slowly climbed down the water tower, being as careful as possible to leave herself no chance of slipping whatsoever. It was a miracle that other unicorn, the book-thief, had survived the fall, and she didn't trust her luck to grant her two miracles in one day. *So, so cold. Oh, that's cold.*

When Twilight finally set her hooves on mostly-solid ground, she was met with another surprise. There, on a stick jutting up out of the mud, hung the stranger's cloak. Its outside was covered in mud, but Twilight quickly discovered that the inside was almost dry.

Twilight wasted no time slinging the cloak about herself, pulling the cord close around her neck and raising the hood. She felt warmer already, but she was still keen to get back to the Golden Oak as quickly as she could - Spike could have a roaring fire and a cup of shimmerberry tea ready in less than ten minutes, and the combination sounded like just the thing she needed to get some body heat and magic back.

Still, she hesitated as she looked around at the treeline. She wasn't sure the mystery pony was still there, but still...

"Thank you!" she called. Nopony replied.

When she got back to the Golden Oak a few minutes later, she found the three missing books sitting on the floor, utterly mud-free, just a few feet beyond the welcome mat. They, too, were almost dry.

The first thing that Lapis did, when he woke up the following morning, was sneeze.

The second thing was that he went to go blow his nose, as were the third and fourth.

Lapis *hated* colds. He especially hated them when he knew exactly why he'd caught them, and what he could've done - but didn't do - not to catch

them. If he'd kept his cloak on, instead of hanging it on a stick at the base of the freshly-fixed ladder. If he'd gone straight back to his shop, instead of galloping to the Golden Oak from the water tower and then to his shop from the Golden Oak. If he'd done either of those things, he'd be as healthy as a horse.

Hardy har har. Thank you, English language, you're hilarious.

After a hot shower, an omelet, a mug of coffee, and a glass of water, Lapis was feeling close enough to better that he was up to visiting the Town Hall. It was a beautiful morning - the sunrise was all rose-gold clouds, on blue skies so bright and clear that Lapis half-expected them to shimmer. The breeze was just crisp and fast enough to wake him up, but not so cold as to make him shiver - while the sunlight was warm without baking him, just warm enough to soothe the ache in his bruised hip.

There were a couple of different falls that could've been responsible for his hip, but Lapis wasn't really feeling up to playing the blame game - no matter what he picked, the blame always ended up back on himself. The same was true for his cold, and as Lapis grew closer to the doors of Town Hall, he found himself running over the details of his chase with Twilight Sparkle, over and over again.

The second-biggest mistake Lapis had made, as far as he could tell, was fixing the ladder for Twilight to climb down on. That ladder had been broken before he'd moved it, and repaired seamlessly afterward. If Twilight noticed that detail, connected it to Mend-All spells, and asked around town about any ponies who were extra-good at fixing stuff, Lapis was basically toast.

Then again, Lapis thought, she didn't seem to have the firmest grasp on what spells most unicorns were familiar with using on a daily basis. I've never seen any pony but her using an Umbrella Spell, Lyra included. Maybe she'll think Mend-Alls are another thing she thinks all unicorns are familiar with - though, I guess I can't rely on a 'maybe'.

The runner-up for second-biggest mistake was delivering the books back to Twilight's house. If she did have some spells that did detective work, Lapis

had basically left his hoofprints all over those books - though, he wasn't sure if hoofprints were a method of identification used in Equestria. He hadn't yet been asked to provide his, after all.

The biggest mistake, however, didn't have any competitors. He'd talked to Twilight, directly. More than that, he'd quite possibly let her save his life, though he *might've* returned the favor, maybe. He'd returned the books, alright, but now Twilight had personal motivation to find him, and that was - in theory - infinitely worse than a trio of missing library books. Lapis didn't think Twilight had seen his face, since he'd just caked everything but his eyes in mud - all the same, getting anywhere near Twilight was an absolute no, at least for however long it took for her memory to fade.

All that, and Lapis still wasn't any closer to figuring out a fraction of what his damn horn could do. Twilight had teleported, created gusts of wind strong enough to throw barrels, and brought plants to life during their chase, and Lapis hadn't been able to defend himself in any way but telekinesis and terrible parkour. He was under-equipped, under-prepared, and under-informed for where he was and what he needed to do. *So... basically just test season all over again.*

When Lapis walked into the Town Hall, he was quickly greeted by a secretary, who ushered him to a small side room. There, the Mayor was busy poking through a vaguely-familiar pile of brightly-colored wood scraps. Objects were piled in neat stacks against the front wall - a pile of identical starry-blue, wide-brimmed hats, a stack of matching cloaks, what looked like a curling iron, and some other boxy objects that Lapis couldn't make out.

"Oh!" the Mayor said, quickly standing up. "Good morning, Lapis. I wasn't expecting you over here so soon, I was just looking through the wreckage of that magician's cart. We've been hoping she'd come back and claim it, but since she hasn't... well, here in a few hours it'll become legally identical to litter, and therefore becomes town property, so I thought I'd go ahead and see whether there was anything worth keeping out of a landfill. Are you alright? You're limping a little."

“I am?” Lapis asked, glancing back at his own flank in confusion. “Huh. Well, I slipped as I was getting off the ladder, but I didn’t think it was that bad. No, I’m all good, but I wish I could say the same for the brace - it’s a giant ring of wood on top of the, uh, plate-shaped part, and it’s splintered bad enough that repairing it would take me a good three days to fix. The rest of it is fine, but that brace needs fixed.”

Mayor Mare sighed. “Well, I suppose it could’ve been worse. Thank you, Lapis. I know being Ponyville’s repair-pony isn’t an easy job, and I know that my consultation was a lot to ask...” She paused, glancing around the room. “You know... why don’t you have a look around? There are a few things I’ve found in this wagon that aren’t completely tacky, and unless Ms. Lulamoon comes back in the next three-and-a-half hours, they’re town property... and since you’re a town employee, that’s legitimate enough reason for you to have something from the pile!”

“Oh,” Lapis said, blinking in surprise. “Uh, sure. Let me look around real quick. Thanks, Ms. Mayor.”

Mayor Mare chuckled. “Please, just call me Mare.” She got back to digging in the pile, and after a few moments, Lapis started looking through the stacks by the wall. He skipped over the robes, hats, and curling iron - “fairy-tale wizard” wasn’t really his style, and neither was a curled mane. Instead, he proceeded straight to the boxy objects.

The first in the stack was a simple wooden box, which by all accounts appeared to be empty. The second and third objects, however, were books - both the dustiest Lapis had ever seen, and so worn-down that he half-expected them to fall apart as he picked them up. One was a volume bound in faded black-and-yellow canvas, the cover of which had been hastily covered by star-painted tape and labeled “The Great and Powerful Trixie’s Tome of Untold Magical Secrets.” Lapis carefully removed the central strip of tape, and almost laughed aloud - underneath, the book’s genuine title was *Magic 4 Dummies*.

This is one of the books Lyra recommended for me, Lapis realized, and he shoved it into his freshly-cleaned saddlebag without a second thought, quickly grabbing the other book. This volume was bound in a dark brown

substance which looked oddly like rubber, or possibly pleather. It certainly wasn't genuine leather - the sheen of it was all wrong for that, as was the color.

Carefully, Lapis opened the book to the first page that had words on it, and began to read...

Lesson One, for any pony who picks up this book, is this: keep a notebook, and record everything.

There are no words or conventions in Equish, or any other language, that are capable of providing adequate emphasis to the sentence above. Should you develop genuine prowess in the science of artifice, you will rapidly construct devices with more components, static and moving, than you could ever hope to remember. Carving a label into each is one method of ensuring you remember their identity; however, the hardness of many metals mean that this method is best reserved for ponies who value neither their time nor their sanity.

As such, you will keep a notebook, in which you describe in complete detail the process by which you design, refine, and assemble your creations. In addition, you will draw diagrams, at every angle, face, and diagonal, of both the assembled and exploded configurations of your inventions. In these diagrams, you will label the size, material, and purpose of every plate, rod, and sheet, every nut, bolt, washer, screw, and stud.

I do not write the words "you will" as an order. I write them as a statement of fact: you will do these things not because I say you will, but because you will find it is the only way to practice artifice and retain your sanity...

Lapis snorted and rolled his eyes. "Sounds like my old Engineering 101 professor," he muttered.

"What?" Mayor Mare said, sticking her head up from the pile of wood scraps.

"Nothing," Lapis called back, and flipped to the next page, which contained example diagrams. He frowned as he examined them, then his eyes widened

as he recognized the angles from which they'd been drawn. Lapis read on, and his jaw almost dropped as he found the first definitions...

Artifice is the practice of manipulating free-flowing mana via physical materials, rather than by the channelling of a unicorn's will through the methods commonly referred to as a "spell." Free-flowing mana, meanwhile, is the term used to describe magic that is ready to be put to use, whether it is drawn from the aether of Equestria or siphoned off a unicorn's own reservoir by way of telekinetic grasping of a controlled-pulse mana siphon. A diagram of this device, with accompanying explanation, may be found on the following page...

A slow, wide grin spread across Lapis' face. *This doesn't just sound like an engineering textbook. It is an engineering textbook - an entry-level guide to magical engineering.*

I have half a degree in engineering. That's probably plenty.

"Find something you like?" Mayor Mare asked.

Lapis snapped the book shut, then deliberately tucked it into his saddlebags.
"Yeah. Yeah, I think I did."

I gotta get out of the house more often, he thought, and chuckled. And for the first time since he'd arrived in Equestria, he felt prepared.

"*Dear Princess Celestia,*" Twilight dictated, and then she paused. "...I don't know, Spike, is this really a 'Dear-Princess-Celestia' problem?"

Spike hastily scribbled out a few words, then huffed. "Twilight, I don't know if you've noticed, but every week you write to the princess about your *friendship drama*. This is kind of a bigger deal."

"But that's different!" Twilight replied, waving a hoof. "I was specifically instructed to learn about friendship, and I'm informing her of exactly what I learned on a weekly basis. And in addition... well, I suspect she has other

motives, but it would be rude of me to make assumptions about the Princess' intentions-

"C'mon, Twilight, just say it!" Spike said, spreading his arms. "You think she's checking in on you to make sure you're not turning into a hermit-pony again, like you were back in Canterlot when you found the prophecy!"

"What? No, I thought she might've been lonely," Twilight said, cocking her head in confusion. She blinked, then clapped a hoof to her mouth as she realized what she'd said. "Don't write that?"

"I won't," Spike replied. "But Twilight, whoever this unicorn is, he left you up a water tower. You! You fought Nightmare Moon and won-"

"I didn't really fight her," Twilight mumbled.

"-and he managed to strip away your magic and leave you stuck on a water tower, in the rain, without even an umbrella!"

Twilight sucked a breath in through her teeth, her ears tucking back.

"Well... he didn't really 'strip away' my magic, either."

"What do you mean?" Spike asked, leaning past the side of his parchment and cocking an eyebrow.

"Well... I might've... sorta teleported while I was chasing him, and-"

Spike sighed, lowering the parchment and quill, his ear fins drooping in exasperation. "How many times?"

Twilight's ears flopped back on her head, and she averted her eyes. "Three," she muttered.

Spike slow-blinded, then rolled the parchment back into a scroll and tossed it over his shoulder. "Forget everything I just said." He stood up from the chair, cracked his knuckles and back, then stumped off into the kitchen.

"I'm making you a whole pot of shimmerberry tea, you're going to drink it, and then you're going to go to bed and not cast any spells tomorrow."

He poked his head back through the doorway, shooting her a suspicious glare. “Any. Spells. Got it?”

“...Thank you,” Twilight replied. “But aren’t you still concerned about the water-tower thing?”

“Well, if it hadn’t put you in danger, I guess I’d kinda be impressed,” Spike replied. “He gave the books back, so he really didn’t mean to steal them, and I guess he just panicked when you accused him. And... well, I mean, if you were chasing this stallion the way you usually chase a loose book, then it’s kind of a miracle he managed to get away! ...You didn’t get him, right?” Spike added, popping his head back into the room again, glancing around as if he expected to see a pony hog-tied and hanging from the ceiling.

“I almost did,” Twilight muttered, and then she sighed. “And that’s the problem. I almost got him really, *really* hurt, Spike. He was sliding down the ladder, and I thought, ‘Oh, I’ll just pull the ladder back up, that’ll stop him!’” Twilight pantomimed an empty-eyed, dull smile with the last sentence, then sighed, her ears flopping back on her head again. “Kinda forgot about gravity, and he slid off the end of the ladder. I was quick enough to catch him, but that’s about the same time my magic ran out, and, well...” Twilight paused, her ears cocking half-upright. “Huh.”

“What is it?” Spike asked, raising an eyebrow.

“You know... it’s the strangest thing, but I could’ve sworn that ladder was broken when my magic fizzled,” Twilight said, tapping her chin with a hoof. “But when he put it up to let me climb down, it was fixed. I think one of the books he returned might’ve been about... Mend-All spells, maybe? Let me just- ah!” Twilight yelped as a spark shot off her horn, raising a hoof to rub it gingerly.

Spike sighed. “Oh, no you don’t. Listen, Twilight, whatever he did to fix the ladder, it worked! He got you down, and now you’re safe, and now you’re *staying in bed*. And tomorrow, you’re going to find this pony and apologize to him.”

“That’s the thing - I can’t!” Twilight said, waving her hooves and falling backward into her bed. “I never got a good look at his face, it was covered in mud since the first time I saw him. I don’t know who he is, I don’t know what colors his coat or mane are, I don’t think I’ve ever even *seen* him before!”

“Of course you haven’t, Twilight,” Spike replied, walking back out of the room. “Ponyville’s a small town, but it’s not that small. There’s no way you’d get to know everypony in town!”

“Well, not yet, anyway,” Twilight muttered, turning to stare out her window. “I only just moved here.” She frowned, furrowing her brow in concentration. “Hmm... but Pinkie might.”

Spike popped his head back into the room. “Hey, I can make some chocolate chip cookies to go with that shimmerberry tea, if you want them.”

Twilight hesitated, glancing back and forth. "Spike, I wasn't really turning into a hermit-pony, was I?"

“...No,” Spike said, his eyes wide and innocent. “Would you like some chocolate chip cookies?”

Twilight’s ears tucked back, and she smiled as she gave a small nod. Spike grinned. “Gotcha. Comin’ right up!”

Spike withdrew from the room, and Twilight resumed staring out the window. Her brow furrowed in focus as she looked at the Sugarcube Corner Bakery, and tried to figure out what the least bizarre way to approach Pinkie for help would be.

Author's Notes:

Patch Notes

- In “The Griffon, Brushed Off,” the portrait of the mustached griffon is incorrectly described as a portrait of a mustached pony - this

occurred because initial rendering happened before thematic appropriateness checks were ran, is now fixed (Winter Quill)

- In the same chapter, "weather" was incorrectly written as "waeather." After extensive internal debate, the cause of this typo was determined to most likely be incorrect influence filtration, allowing the memetic entity known as "Ugandan Knuckles" to corrupt the word generation process. Typo corrected, influence filtration is now under stricter regulations (PlatinumPony)

Alrighty, and now here we are at the actual author's notes! Kinda rushed a little to get this one out, wanted to see what I could do. And as it turns out, that's this - a little lighter on the metaphorical-content side, but hey, I was throwing a lot of loose threads in there, I had to tie them up... and then immediately add a couple of new ones. Whoops.

So, the thing in this chapter that took me the longest time was probably storytime with Carrot Cake. I don't know exactly where my impression of Carrot Cake's character comes from, but the person he sounds like in my head is Jay's dad from LEGO Ninjago. Anyway, for whatever reason, I looked at Carrot Cake, and something about him just said, "This stallion tells stories," so I went ahead and tried to give him some physical comedy to share, and here we are!

If any of you are concerned that I don't do much editing when I make these - don't be, because the original Twilight-On-the-Water-Tower scene had some *angst* to it, for some reason. As in, implied-hypothermia, none-of-my-friends-can-hear-me-over-this-wind levels of angst. Completely jarring, totally different in tone from what I was going for, so I went right ahead and trimmed it back down to minimal levels of implied momentary worry. I think it fits much better, now.

And finally, I've got something to admit, something that concerns the whole "artifice" thing that Lapis is about to dive into. See, the thing about my knowledge of actual, real-world engineering is... well, I'm an English major.

I apologize in advance.

See you in the next one!

The Fifth One: The Trouble with Learning...

It was an extra-hot summer day in Ponyville. Cicadas were screaming in the trees, and any ponies who weren't joyfully splashing around in the shallower parts of the nearby lake were either hurrying to their destinations on streets that shimmered with heat, or slumped on a couch in their living room with their preferred variety of cold drink. There wasn't a wisp of cloud in the bright-blue sky - the only thing that came close to blocking the baking rays of the sun was the newly-repaired water tower. Even a few days ago, when the skies had been clouded with the smoke of a snoring dragon, Ponyville hadn't felt nearly as clogged with heat.

In other words, it was one of the worst kinds of weather imaginable to be stuck up on somepony's roof, painstakingly weaving clumps of thatch into the pegasus-shaped dent left by Rainbow Dash's latest failed stunt. But Lapis Print had bills to pay, so there he was - sweat dripping off his open muzzle, panting for breath as the sun baked him in his fur, trying his best to remain lucid as he tied one more sheet of twine-bound straw onto the steep slope of the rooftop. This was his last request for the day, and also the only outdoor request he'd gotten all day, so he was hoping to get it done before noon - it wasn't humid yet, but he'd heard that would change in the afternoon, and frankly Lapis didn't feel like finding out whether Equestria's apparent law of "no-serious-permanent-harm-ever" extended to protection from heatstroke.

Still, by the time he finished repairing the roof and climbed down from the ladder, Lapis had discovered something entirely new about being a pony - as he moved, his coat would rub against itself, the hairs sliding against each others' length like the bristles of a brush. While this wasn't normally a source of anything unexpected, when his coat was wet with something thicker than water - such as, say, sweat - and there was a large, flat object like the inside of his saddlebags pressing against his fur, the combination of frictions would end up working the liquid into a lather. For sweat, this

turned out to vaguely resemble soap bubbles, with the key differences being a faint yellow tinge and a considerably worse smell. It was almost invisible on Lapis' pale coat, but the smell certainly wasn't, and the feeling of foam running down the outside of his barrel was jarring enough to spur Lapis on his way back to his house.

It wasn't the first time that Lapis had been unsettled by some quirk of his new body. When he'd had his first big cleaning day, Lapis had initially been bewildered by the amount of short, coarse pet hair he kept finding on his bedsheets and in his dustpan. He'd been halfway considering the idea that there was a stowaway dog somewhere in his house, until he'd realized that the shed fur was the same color as his own coat. And even before that, there'd been the matter of using the bathroom - suffice to say, Lapis was glad to be a unicorn, because he did not want to find out how, or worse, *if*, ponies without horns used toilet paper.

When Lapis walked through his door, dreaming of a long, cold shower, his thoughts were instantly interrupted by the blast of cool air that greeted him as he passed the threshold. He shut the door behind him and took a few seconds to bask in the chill, lowering his head and raising his ears, a relieved grin spreading across his face. *Ahh... oh, that's so much better. Man, A/C is great...*

...Wait. I don't have A/C.

Lapis frowned, his brow furrowed, and then opened his eyes. *What in the world...?* He'd looked over the inside of his house the day he'd moved in, and had been disappointed not to find a single A/C vent inside. Lapis had assumed Equestria hadn't invented air conditioning yet, and decided he would have to make do for the hotter and colder months of the year by opening his windows, or by using the wood-stoves in his bedroom and the kitchen - both were low-tech solutions, but both generally worked quite well. *Not this well, though... What's going on here?*

One brief, cold shower and ten minutes later, Lapis had made his way into the closet behind the counter, and was staring warily at the hatch in the ceiling that presumably led to the attic. He'd checked and double-checked the rest of the house, basement workshop included, and hadn't found any

sign of whatever was keeping the place cool. He hadn't been up in the attic yet, but now... well, it looked like it was time.

Lapis gripped the string with his magic - and flinched as a sharp tapping sound echoed through the building, releasing the string and glancing around. *Not from up there... the window?*

He left the closet, glancing around, and relaxed when he saw a familiar-looking pigeon staring through the window in his living room. Lapis opened the door, and Nikki flew inside at once, perching atop his head and wiping her brow with a wing.

"Hey, Nikki," Lapis said. "Good timing - I was just about to check out my attic, and I could probably use an extra set of eyes. Care to help me look around?"

Nikki sighed and rolled her eyes, then nodded with a smirk. Lapis grinned, then returned to the closet, pulling down the hatch and unfolding the ladder. Then, after staring warily at the window into darkness that awaited him, he climbed into the attic.

The first thing that Lapis did, once he reached the top of the ladder, was take a deep breath and concentrate, quickly flicking through the sections he'd read of *Magic 4 Dummies*. *Alright, let's see... reach out like telekinesis, but without grasping anything. Then the incantation is... wait, what was it again? 'In the darkness, grant me sight, call to me the gift of light?'*

Lapis felt a faint tugging sensation within his chest, and a strain like great weight on his body as his telekinetic grip briefly latched onto *something* - then, color flared into existence on the other side of his eyelids. When he opened his eyes, a brown light was washing over his surroundings from his horn, dim but nonetheless bright enough to see by.

Lapis exhaled a relieved breath. *Good, that worked.* Magic, he'd learned, was a discipline with fuzzier boundaries than he was comfortable with - he

still didn't have a handle on the theory of what magic did, and he definitely wasn't sure what made a spell more "advanced" in terms of how much of a unicorn's magical reservoir it consumed.

The practice, however, was just within his reach: his 'will', the telekinetic fifth limb that was based in his horn, was something that had a finite strength and a point of exhaustion in much the same way his other four limbs did. But, along with a whole bunch of other differences that Lapis hadn't bothered to memorize, his 'will' didn't move in quite the same way as a leg - instead, it responded to his focus and intent. To touch something with his hoof, he had to reach out and touch it - to touch something with his magic, he had to *think about* touching it with magic, and *mean* to touch it with magic.

The trouble sat in thinking about things correctly, or rather, directing greater portions of the mind's focus to think about processes with more numerous or complex steps than 'pick up that pencil and write with it.' This was where incantations came in: the words they used, or the languages they were in, weren't strictly important. It was the concepts behind the words that mattered, the action that Spanish speakers meant when they thought "correr," and that English speakers meant when they thought "run." The point of incantations was to put the right concepts together in the right state of mind, and to demand as much of Lapis' focus as possible when they were being thought or said: that way, by thinking through the incantation, he would end up guiding his 'will' in whatever directions he needed to in order to cast the spell.

And that, sadly, was just the tip of the iceberg. Brains, as it turned out, weren't very good at keeping their processes in separate boxes, and magic was excessively effective at demonstrating this problem - if Lapis thought about picking up a glass with telekinesis, and while he was holding the glass, he thought 'boy, I sure hope I don't break this,' then there would suddenly be a fair chance that he'd end up breaking that glass. On top of that, the strength of the spell and the chance his stray thoughts would interfere would be greater or worse depending on what emotion he was feeling at the time of casting, and the degree of both the emotion's effect

and the stray thoughts' interference would be greater or worse depending on what type or school of magic he was casting.

There were multiple spreadsheets in the book, but the gist of it, so far as Lapis could tell, was this: for magic more advanced than telekinesis, a distracted, conflicted, and distressed unicorn would cast faultier, weaker magic than a focused, certain, and comfortable unicorn. Light magic, which included both the simple Hornlight spell and the more complex invisibility spells, was one of the stabler schools of magic in terms of standing up to stray thoughts; but, it was also a lot more affected by fear than a lot of other schools. So, if Lapis wanted to try escaping Pinkie or another protagonist via turning invisible, he'd almost certainly need to take a deep breath or two first.

Turning on a light in the dark, though, was easy, and Lapis didn't need to devote any more thought to it than he already had as he started looking around his attic space. He'd known for a while now that his roof was made of treated copper plates, but whoever had painted the outside of the roof to look like ceramic shingles had, for some reason, done the same for the inside. As such, much of the light from Lapis' horn was reflected back with a terracotta-orange tinge, and he had a hard time telling what color anything in the attic space actually was.

He could, however, still see, and that gave him ample reason to cock an eyebrow as he spotted the wooden slats forming a wide, solid box around one of his chimney-pipes. ...*Weird. There's only two chimney-pipes up here - is that what those slats are for, to cover up the spot where the forge's chimney connects to this one?*

Nikki took flight and landed atop one of the slats, while Lapis levitated a crowbar up from the tool rack in the closet, and shortly managed to remove one of the box's sides. It turned out, he was partially right - the forge's chimney-pipe was, in fact, connected to this one. But on top of that...

"Well, what do we have here," Lapis muttered, staring at the whirring tangle of rods, chains, and machinery that enclosed his chimney-pipe. Just

about all of it connected to the copper panels of the roof, either via wooden braces that were bolted on, or else directly via what looked some kind of dark solder that glittered in Lapis' Hornlight. More concerning, though, was the fact that - instead of connecting to anything that Lapis could see - most of the machinery instead vanished into a pit in the floor, deeper than the light of Lapis' horn could penetrate.

Lapis briefly glanced at Nikki. *If I asked her to fly down there and check it out, would it be safe? Would she even be able to tell me what it connected to? Maybe if I could get a lantern small enough for her to carry -*

Nikki cocked an eyebrow at him. Then she scowled, and cuffed his ear with her wing.

"Ow," Lapis muttered. "Okay, my bad. I'll figure it out myself." He headed back down the ladder and into the basement, grabbing the second of his two new books off the workbench: the apparently unnamed introduction to artifice. He climbed back up the basement stairs, but paused in the closet. *Is it just me, or is it a little quiet for this time of day?*

Frowning, Lapis shut the false wall that led to the stairs, then exited the closet and looked around from inside his house. The streets of Ponyville looked about the same as they usually did, aside from the heat - the thing is, they were also empty.

Lapis grabbed his mask out of his saddlebag, then carefully stuck his head out the front door and looked up and down the street. To the left, there wasn't a single pony in sight - to the right, however, Lapis spotted a tall pony in a brown cloak and hood walking down the road toward him. What little of the pony's coat Lapis could see looked white with gray bands, and they wore a series of golden bracelets on their front-right leg. It was hard to explain exactly why, but beneath the cloak, this pony looked... sharper, somehow. More angular. It was difficult to explain, but something about the hard creases formed by this pony's cloak gave Lapis the impression that, whoever they were, they weren't nearly as soft and rounded as the average pony.

The cloaked figure turned to look at Lapis, and he realized with a shock that this pony's eyes were solid, faintly-glowing pools of yellow light - it was almost like looking at a Jawa from Star Wars. Then, the strange pony blinked, and their gaze lost its glow, revealing a perfectly normal - if angular - pair of aquamarine-colored eyes.

Now, where have I seen her before, Lapis thought, trying to place the strange pony's face in his head. ...*Oh, wait a second, it's the zebra lady!*
Now I remember, this is the episode about not racially profiling people.
Right. Cool, I shouldn't need to worry about the protagonists today. Lapis gave the zebra a quick wave, which she returned after a moment's hesitation, then he ducked back inside, tucking his mask back onto its hook in his saddlebag and grabbing one of the spare magic lanterns off his wall. Then, he brought the lantern up into the attic alongside his book.

"Hey, Nikki," he said, quickly opening up the book on artifice and setting the lantern down by the arrangement of mechanisms. "Could I ask you to help me look for weird symbols on any of the copper parts? I get the feeling they're there, but they'll definitely be a little small for me to spot on my own."

Nikki nodded, then flew up onto one of the machine's brackets, taking care not to catch her wings in any of the moving parts. Lapis, meanwhile, was busy looking the machine over with more than a little interest. He'd been hoping that artifice would be a bigger help to him, but it turned out, he needed a lot of metal to make anything - sure, there was a whole forge in his basement, but he didn't have the raw material to make any parts, to the best he could do for now was find other machinery and see if he could cobble something together from spare parts. And that meant first, he had to figure out what parts counted as "spare."

The big thing that grabbed his attention was a copper rod almost like a pipe, that was soldered directly to the roof, but then ran directly into the depths of the pit. The part of the rod nearest the ceiling was enclosed between a whirring set of silvery semicircles on bicycle chains: the bicycle chains were rotating in synchrony, in such a way that the semicircles came together near the top of the pole to form complete hoops that traveled about two feet

down the copper rod before separating, then heading back up the outsides of the chains.

“Huh,” Lapis muttered. “Well, the copper parts are obviously copper, and I think these silver-looking hoops are actually... aluminum?” He paused, then briefly looked over the relevant section in the book. “Yep, the big three metals for artifice are copper, aluminum, and iron. Runed copper conducts magic, runed aluminum pushes magic away, and runed iron sucks it in... any iron in here?”

Lapis briefly looked around the attic space, and grinned as he saw a narrow series of iron rods running up and down the length of the roof, almost like support beams. Closer inspection of the rods revealed that each was inscribed with a pair of runes, which some quick referencing in the book identified as an activation primary rune, offset by a diminishing modifier rune. “So, the iron rods are runed, and they’re trying to pull in any magic that gets too near to them, but this diminishing rune is weakening that pull by...” Lapis quickly checked over the spreadsheet of runes. “...just about enough that they can’t pull magic out of a pony, or out of the copper sheets.”

Nikki touched down on Lapis’ head, then pecked at an angular depression in one of the copper sheets - upon closer inspection, Lapis found the depression to be another activation rune, but painted over with the ceramic-like paint that covered the rest of the shingles’ surface. “...These copper sheets are runed too, meaning that they’re acting as magical conductors. The iron rods act like magnets, pulling any free-flowing mana into the copper of the roof... and from there...”

Lapis returned to the copper rod at the center of the room, and this time, he didn’t need Nikki’s help to spot the activation rune indented into the rod’s surface. “From there, the magic is distributed along all the pieces of copper that are touching, including this rod, as evenly as possible. Like air in a balloon... except these aluminum hoops repel magic. They close around the rod, then travel down, repelling any magic that gets near them...”

The penny dropped, and Lapis grinned again. “They’re *pushing* the magic down the rod, like squeezing yogurt out of a tube - this rod, these hoops, they’re like a pump! This entire section, plus the roof, is designed to gather

magic from the surrounding area without harvesting it from any ponies, then to pump it down this rod and into..."

Lapis blinked, then frowned. "Into... what?" He looked again at the copper shingles of his roof, and suddenly felt a chill as he realized he had no idea why the pony who built this house wanted to accumulate magic desperately enough to automate the process. What he did know, though, unsettled him even further - between the wooden covering for the machines, the ceramic-colored paint on the copper roofing, and the hidden forge in this building's basement, Lapis suspected that the builder of this house had done everything in their power to hide the fact that they were accumulating ambient magic. It could be that every house in Ponyville had similar mechanisms, and that was how all their stoves worked, but...

Slowly, carefully, Lapis levitated the lantern off the floor, then began to lower it down the pit in the attic floor. Nikki peered over his shoulder as Lapis followed the gleaming copper rod down, down, and further down, until -

Someone knocked on Lapis' door, and he flinched, dropping the lantern in surprise. It only fell a few inches before clattering to a stop, and a quick glance down the pit confirmed that it had hit the bottom - the copper rod, however, turned at a ninety-degree angle and continued out of sight. Lapis sighed, half relieved and half annoyed - he'd been expecting the copper rod to just keep going down into some cave system he didn't know existed, but it looked like it didn't go any deeper than his basement. Still, he'd have to come back and follow up later.

Right now, some pony was knocking on his door. "C'mon, Nikki," Lapis said, heading for the ladder.

"Lyra?" Lapis asked, opening up his front door. "What're you doing here- oomf!"

"Quiet down!" Lyra hissed, having tackled Lapis to the ground. "She might hear you! I saw she was headed this way - did you see her?"

“See who...” Lapis began, and then it registered. “Oh, wait. You mean the zebra?”

Lyra’s ears folded back. She stood upright, stepping off of Lapis and glancing around as if the cloaked stranger might be somewhere in the room - then she nodded.

“Yeah, I saw the zebra,” Lapis said, getting to his hooves. “I waved at her...”

Lyra’s eyes widened, her ears tucking back.

“...She waved back,” Lapis continued. “And then nothing else happened. What’re you panicking about?”

“Um, well...” Lyra started. “Her! The zebra...” Lyra glanced around again, then lowered her voice. “Zecora! She’s weird, and she has stripes painted on her fur, and her eyes glow! She’s gotta be up to no good!”

Lapis raised a hoof to count off his counter-arguments, then remembered he no longer had fingers to count them off with. “How so, zebras are born with stripes, and... well, yeah, but she can turn that on and off, and she’s got perfectly normal eyes underneath. No Nightmare-Moon slit-pupils or anything.”

“...Okay, but both of those things are weird, and besides, she *lives* in the Everfree Forest!” Lyra protested, then she yelped as Lapis’ front door opened again.

“See, Lyra?” Bon Bon said, shooting her friend an annoyed look as she stepped into Lapis’ shop. “Zecora didn’t curse him, or do anything else. He’s fine.” Bon Bon turned to Lapis. “Afternoon.”

“Afternoon,” Lapis replied. “Lyra drag you over here?”

“Not intentionally,” Bon Bon replied. “Listen, Lyra. Zebras are just as much ponies as we are, they’re just from a different part of the world. That zebra

might look a little strange even for a zebra, but if she is what I think she is, that just makes her a shaman.”

“Oh,” Lapis said. “Well, that explains the glowing eyes.”

“Exactly,” Bon Bon replied.

“W-wait, what’s a shaman?” Lyra asked, her eyes widening as her ears flopped back on her head.

Bon Bon huffed. “Lyra, shamans aren’t something to be scared about. A shaman is somepony who learns to use magic in ways that don’t need a horn. Most of them are zebras, some of them are diplomats, and all of them are experts with herbal remedies, medicines, and even magic potions. And even then, the potions are more like a side job - she’s more likely to come into town looking for tea herbs than for brewing ingredients.”

“Okay,” Lyra said, but she still looked worried. “But... why live in the Everfree, then?”

“I’m... not sure, but I’d bet she has good reason,” Bon Bon replied.

Lapis jumped in. “The Everfree’s got a lot of weird plants in it, right? Maybe that includes a lot of special herbs.”

“...Hey, yeah!” Lyra said, her ears perking up. “Didn’t Granny Smith say she found the first Zap-Apples in the Everfree?”

“You know, I think she did,” Bon Bon replied. “Anyway, Lapis, how’ve you been?”

“Oh. Uh, pretty decent, actually,” Lapis replied. “I had it rough a couple of days ago - first I slipped and bruised my hip, then I caught a cold, but both of those have just about sorted themselves out. Oh, and I managed to get my hooves on a copy of *Magic 4 Dummies*, so next time we end up stuck in a dark alley, you’ll only need to grab a lantern for yourself. How about you?”

“Whoa, wait, you learned the Hornlight spell?” Lyra asked. “C’mon, you can’t just say that and not show us!”

“Alright, hang on,” Lapis said, rolling his eyes and grinning, then he shut his eyes and quickly thought through the incantation. The strange weight-and-tug sensation came again, and a moment later, a glowing coat of Lapis’ brown-tinted magic wrapped around his horn. Lapis maintained the spell for a second or two, then dropped it. “It’s not super-bright, but it works - I used it to check out my attic a little earlier.”

“Not bad,” Bon Bon said, nodding. “It probably only seems dim because of the color - you know, I don’t think I’ve ever seen a unicorn with brown magic before. Does it run in your family?”

“...Well, I can’t say for sure, but I know brown eyes do,” Lapis replied. “Maybe it’s related. But anyway, how have the two of you been?”

“Well, I’ve managed to land a concert inside the Town Hall, so I’ve been practicing a lot for that,” Lyra said. “And Bon Bon has been-”

“Trying to work out a good recipe for lemon meringue cookies,” Bon Bon finished, shooting Lyra a smirk. “I think I managed to work one out, but we’ll have to see how they sell. ...Hey, Lyra, you think I could pass out a plate or two at the concert, see how well they go over?”

“Ooh! That’d be perfect!” Lyra replied, clapping her hooves together. “We’ll need to talk to the organizer, but I can’t think of a reason they’d say no!”

“Well, I’d bring a second dessert option too, in case some pony is allergic to lemons or something,” Lapis said. “Still, when’s the concert happening?”

“It’s four days from today,” Lyra replied. “The Mayor wanted to try having a music festival, so she’s hosting a scaled-down version first. All the musician-ponies in town will be taking a turn to perform, starting at noon. I’ve got the three-thirty slot, which is two songs before the end... hey, you wanna come hear us play?”

“I think I might, yeah,” Lapis said, nodding. “Noon to... let’s say, four-ish? I’ll have to see what my workload looks like that day, but if it’s clear, then sure!”

“Great!” Bon Bon said, grinning. “It’s nice to see you’re finally settling in a little.”

“Whoa, what do you mean?” Lapis asked, cocking an eyebrow. “Bon Bon, I’ve been living here for almost a month now.” ...*Wait, I have?*

Oh. Wow. That went fast.

“Yeah, and during that time, we’ve hardly ever seen you sitting down for longer than a meal,” Bon Bon replied, Lyra nodding from beside her. “You’re almost always either working, hiding from Pinkie, or in here getting some sleep, and ponies need more than a job and rest to be happy. It’s good that you’re getting out a little.”

“...Well, I guess I can’t really stay cooped up forever,” Lapis muttered. ...*I kinda haven’t been having a life, have I?*

No, I haven’t. My life is on Earth. Equestria isn’t my life, it’s just where I’m living.

A sudden, trilling coo came out of the closet, and all three of the ponies in Lapis’ living room looked over.

“And speaking of cooped up,” Lapis said, quickly levitating the closet door open. Nikki flew out, landed atop Lapis’ head just long enough to cuff him in the ear with a wing, then took off again and settled atop one of the lantern hooks.

Lyra giggled, and Lapis grinned. “Yeah, she was helping me look over some stuff in my attic when Lyra showed up. I guess I kinda got distracted. Sorry, Nikki.”

Nikki glared at him.

“What’s up there, anyway?” Bon Bon asked. “This house have a charging array, or something?”

“A what-now?” Lapis asked, then it clicked. “Oh, you mean like a bundle of magic machines or something?”

“Exactly!” Lyra said. “Pulls spare magic out of the air, uses it to heat your stove, keep the lights on, cool your house, that stuff.”

“Oh, so that’s what it connects to,” Lapis muttered. “Yeah, I didn’t realize I had one until about fifteen minutes ago, and I’ve kinda been up there trying to figure it all out for a while.”

“Wait, you actually have one?” Bon Bon asked, her eyebrows rising. “I thought they were... well, not for private use.”

“I guess it came with the house,” Lapis said. “Why aren’t they cheap? It’s just copper, iron, and aluminum, right?”

Lyra and Bon Bon exchanged a look, then Bon Bon chuckled, and Lyra giggled again.

“What is it?”

“Lapis,” Bon Bon said. “Wherever you grew up, was copper easy to get your hooves on?”

“Well, I wouldn’t say ‘easy,’ but it sure wasn’t hard,” Lapis replied, cocking an eyebrow.

“Yeah. Well, here in Ponyville, the nearest source of copper is a three-day trot to the south,” Bon Bon said. “It’s this little mining town called Amberhoof, right on the edge of the Badlands.”

“Normally, charging arrays are a one-to-a-town thing,” Lyra added. “Most ponies’ houses have a big ol’ iron barrel-doohickey full of magic, that can be lugged back to the town charging station and hooked up to a faucet-thingamajig whenever it runs out of juice.”

“Not the words I would’ve used, but yes, that’s the short version. And that’s without even *mentioning* aluminum,” Bon Bon said. “Apparently the process of making the stuff is tricky business - last I heard, Equestria was getting most of its aluminum out of a trade deal with the Griffon Kingdoms.”

“Huh,” Lapis replied. *Guess whatever pony built this house must’ve been a bit on the rich side, then... and between the giant window and the hidden basement, I guess this place does seem like the sort of building a rich eccentric would commission.*

“Hey,” Lapis found himself asking, “just out of curiosity, do either of you know who lived in this house before I did? Or maybe who built it in the first place?”

Lyra cocked her head, considering. “About... half a dozen repair-ponies over the last ten years, I think. None of them really stayed for long, though. I guess the going got tough, so they got going.”

Bon Bon nodded. “And I’m not really sure who built this house, either... it’s been just the way it is now ever since I moved into Ponyville. I’d be willing to bet Town Hall’s got the original builder-ponies on record, though.”

“Huh. I guess I’ll have to check it out, the next time the Mayor gives me an official errand,” Lapis said.

Bon Bon blinked, cocking an eyebrow. “When was the last time?”

“Oh, she sent me up to take a look at the water tower after the whole giant star-bear thing,” Lapis said. “I ended up climbing down at about the same time the rain started, and I slipped on the last rung of the ladder. That’s how I bruised my hip.”

Lyra winced. “Before the ground got muddy enough to be soft, even? Oof.”

“You didn’t notice anything... strange, while you were over there, did you?” Bon Bon asked, leaning forward. “Anything dangerous, or magical?”

Uh-oh. “Nothing more harmful than some potential splinters,” Lapis said, doing his best to look innocently confused. “Why, what happened?”

“Well, Derpy was talking with me the other day, and she said the cows heard some funny business going down by the water tower,” Bon Bon said, keeping her voice low. “A pair of unicorns got up to some shenanigans, and one of them got stuck on top of the tower without any magic. Derpy looked the place over, but she didn’t find any stuck ponies - just some muddy hoofprints. Probably just some teenagers getting themselves into trouble, but still.”

“...Sounds like a good reason to put a cage around the bottom six feet of the ladder,” Lapis said. “And a lock. And maybe bolt it to the side of the tower, just in case.”

Bon Bon snorted. “Oh, I wish. From what the Mayor’s been saying, getting the smith-ponies to replace the water tower was already a big bite out of the town budget. Safety measures will have to be next quarter, I’ll bet.” She glanced at the door. “And speaking of big bites, I’d better start working on that extra dessert as a backup for the meringue cookies. I’m thinking... pecan bars?”

“Ooh, with brown sugar!” Lyra said, then she glanced nervously at the window. “Do you think she’s gone yet?”

“*Long* gone,” Bon Bon confirmed, rolling her eyes and starting for the door. “And even if she weren’t, she’s not somepony- uh, somezebra? - to be worried about. Anyway, it’s been nice chatting, Lapis.”

“Nice to see you too, both of you,” Lapis said, as Lyra followed Bon Bon out of the door. “See you at the concert!”

“See you there!” Lyra chimed, and then she shut the door behind herself.

Two days later, Lapis wrapped up all his jobs as quickly as possible, then headed straight for the Town Hall. It probably would’ve been smarter to

wait until the Mayor gave him another reason to visit besides just looking up records, but Lapis was through with not knowing who'd put together the secret forge in his hidden basement. *There's already way too much I don't know about my current situation - the least I can do is make sure I'm not sitting on top of some dark wizard's former evil lair.*

When Lapis reached Town Hall, he found the building practically deserted. Mayor Mare was sitting at a desk to one side, her brow furrowed in concentration as she scribbled away at some parchment in front of her. It was odd to see a sentient creature using their mouth to hold a quill - *I mean, she doesn't have a horn, so of course she's gotta write somehow, but still.*

The Mayor looked up as he approached, gently dropping her quill atop the parchment. "Good morning, Lapis! What can I do for you today?"

"Well, I was looking for the records about the house I'm living in," Lapis said. "Who's lived there, who built it, that sort of thing. ...What're you doing out here, anyway? Where's the rest of the ponies who work here?"

Mayor Mare winced, sucking a breath through her teeth. "It's refiling day today, so most of them are in the archives downstairs. I'm sorry, Lapis - it pains me to say it, but today's about the worst day you could have picked to go looking for paperwork. You don't need those records too urgently, do you?"

"Well, not urgently, no," Lapis said, frowning. "It's just... well, I've been finding some quirks in the way my house was built, and I wanted to find out which ponies were responsible, or why."

Mayor Mare cocked her head, considering. "Well, my grandmare told me that house was built when she was still a filly, so I suppose it could just be a product of antique craftsmanship. Why, what sort of things have you been finding?"

Do I tell her about the charging array? Probably not - that might lead to her sending some ponies over, and then there's a chance they'd find the workshop. "Nothing major, just a couple of... odd design priorities.

Honestly, I'm in here out of curiosity more than actual worry, it's no trouble at all to come back some other time."

"Ah. Well, whenever you do drop in, try not to do it the day after tomorrow," Mayor Mare replied. "That'll be another busy one, I'm afraid."

"I heard. The concert thing, right?"

Mayor Mare blinked, then smiled. "Yes, that's right! Did somepony already tell you?"

"Lyra did. Invited me, too - I haven't made sure my schedule's clear yet, but I think I can make it work," Lapis said.

"Well, that was very nice of Ms. Heartstrings," Mayor Mare replied. "Of course, you didn't *need* her invitation to attend, but it's good to hear you're settling in."

There's those words again. 'Settling in.' Lapis wasn't sure how he really felt about them, but he put on his best smile and turned for the door. "Well, you know what they say about all work and no play, Ms. May- uh, Mare. Guess I'll be seeing you in two days, then!"

"I'll see you then!" Mayor Mare called back. "Assuming I can finish signing all these before then, anyway," Lapis heard her mutter, in the moment before the door closed behind him.

As soon as Lapis was ten steps out from the door to the town hall, he heaved an irritated sigh, then made a beeline back toward his workshop. *Alright, forget checking the records, I'm going to do some more digging myself. There's gotta be some clues that the builders left behind. Besides, who knows? Maybe I'll learn a thing or two about carpentry-*

"...anypony who wears brown rain-cloaks, like this one?"

"...Hmm... Nope!"

Pinkie. Lapis stepped into an alleyway, then took a few deep breaths.
Alright. Guess it's time to try out that invisibility spell. Here goes...

Lapis shut his eyes, focused, and reached out with his will. *And the incantation was... wait, shit, what was the incantation?!*

“Nopony? Nopony in Ponyville, at all?” Twilight’s voice asked, from closer by this time. Lapis’ panic immediately doubled.

“Nopey-dopey-lopey!” Pinkie said. “Ooh! My sister, Maud Pie, used to wear one like it, though! It was a brown one, like a really light pale-geode grayish-reddish-brownish, but she took it rock farming so often that it eventually got all dark and dusty-browny-brown. It had a hood too, but she never used it, she said she didn’t like the way it tugged on her ears when she smiled. But she doesn’t wear it anymore, and she definitely doesn’t live in Ponyville, either, so it can’t be hers.”

“Oh.” Twilight sounded disappointed, and for a second Lapis relaxed.
“Well, thanks anyway, Pinkie.” *Incantation, focus, c’mom... “Let light around me pass me by, no eardrum feel my breath or sigh...” then what?!*

“...Listen, this is going to sound strange,” Twilight said, “but I need your help looking for somepony. I owe them an apology, but I don’t know how to find them.”

“Ooh! I was actually thinking about asking you for the same thing!” Pinkie replied, and Lapis felt his blood freeze. “There’s been this new pony in town, just for a little longer than you have, but I’ve only ever seen him for a second or two at once. He’s really fast, and super-duper sneaky!”

“Really fast, huh...?” Twilight muttered. “What did he look like?”

“Hmm... I think he was a unicorn, but I’m not sure. He might be an Earth-pony, but I’ve never seen him flying, so if he’s a pegasus, he’s a super-duper-looper sneaky pegasus.” Pinkie gasped. “What if he’s a ninja pegasus?!”

Oh, I wish. Incantation, come on, two more lines...

“...The pony I was looking for definitely wasn’t a ninja,” Twilight said. “And he wasn’t a pegasus, either. He was a unicorn, but I didn’t see much of what he looked like - it was back during that big rainstorm, so he got covered in mud before I even saw him.”

“Hmm...” Pinkie mused. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen *this* pony covered in mud. When he’s galloping, he almost just looks like one big baby-bluey blur, but if he holds still he’s got a sort of whitey-yellowy coat, with a blueberry-colored mane!” Pinkie paused. “Mmm... blueberries. Hey, if I made two dozen blueberry muffins, would you help me eat them?”

...Got the incantation! Lapis thought, a thrill of triumph running through him as the last two lines fell into place. *'Let light around me pass me by, no eardrum feel my breath or sigh, no pony view my bags or face, and my steps pass without a trace!'*

The effect was immediate - the same tug-and-weight sensation as before rocked Lapis, but much stronger, like more of a yank-and-crush. He felt his knees go wobbly at once, and it took him a second to steady them - but, when he looked down, he couldn’t see his own hooves, or even his saddlebags. *It worked... it worked! Perfect!*

Slowly, carefully, Lapis stepped toward the exit of the alley, and glanced around to see where Pinkie and Twilight were. It looked like he’d gotten his spell off in just the nick of time - the two ponies were all set to pass right by the alley where he’d been taking refuge. Twilight, Lapis saw, had the rain-cloak he’d bought earlier slung over her back, now washed and free of mud, while Pinkie was bouncing along as carefree as ever.

“...Maybe not a whole two dozen,” Twilight was saying, smirking. “Blue mane, white coat... that almost sounds like my brother, Shining Armor, but I don’t think he’s ever been fast enough to blur. Not unless he’s gone through a lot more training, anyway.”

Brother? Lapis thought, carefully stepping around the two ponies as they passed him by. *Oh, yeah, right. He was in the wedding episode, with the succubus-bug things. Good thing that happens in Canterlot; with any luck, I*

won't be- nope, don't think that, you'll jinx it. He took three careful, quiet steps down the street...

There was a brief wobbling noise, something like a laminate sheet being shaken, and then the sound of Pinkie's bouncing hooves began to slow. Lapis paused, looking over his shoulder, and frowned - Pinkie had come to a stop, and was glancing around herself as if looking for something.

"...Pinkie?" Twilight asked. "What's wrong?"

"Huh? Oh, nothing's wrong, Twilight! I just feel like I walked past somepony, and I'm trying to figure out where they are," Pinkie said, continuing to look around, slowly turning toward where Lapis stood, invisible. "Huh. I think they're..."

Oh, you're kidding me, Lapis thought, his eyes widening. *That's just not...*

...Hang on.

Lapis reached into his invisible saddlebags, grabbing the flat, rounded object he knew was his mask, and quickly slid it onto his face. For a second, nothing changed - Pinkie kept staring at the spot where he was standing. She blinked, pulling her head slightly backward, then she smiled. "Oh. Whoopsie!"

Then, to his relief, she turned back around, and started trotting ahead of Twilight, who was cocking an eyebrow at her friend. "What was that about?" Twilight asked.

"Nothing to worry about, Twilight!" Pinkie chimed. "Just an invisible barrel! C'mon, there's blueberry muffins to bake!"

Seriously? You're serious about this? Even through invisibility?! That's... what?!

You know what? Fine. Sure. Why not.

"...I do not get you, Pinkie Pie," Twilight sighed, but she trotted on after her, away from Lapis.

Lapis waited until the pair of ponies were out of sight, then pulled off the mask and dismissed his invisibility spell. At once, he stumbled as his leg jittered, and he blinked as his vision briefly blurred. *Whoa. Guess invisibility's got more of a bite to it, huh?*

He shook his head clear, then started back toward his shop, but found to his annoyance that his knees still trembled a little with every step. More than that, he was feeling almost out of breath, like he'd just finished a long run. *...Exactly the same as a long run, minus the sweat... oh, wait, there it is.* Wow. Okay.

Magic's no joke, huh?

By the time Lapis got back to his shop, he was all he could do to stop himself from huffing and puffing. Again, he headed straight to the shower, which only helped his fatigue a little - it cleared a little of the fog from his head, and gave him a chance to catch his breath, but his knees were still shaky as he ascended the attic ladder with a lantern, and maybe a little shakier as he descended into the basement sans-lantern.

Settling in, Lapis thought, as he started systematically removing the lanterns from the basement. *Am I settling in? I mean, sure, I'm learning a lot more about Equestria than I thought I would, but does that really count? Or am I just keeping informed about my situation?*

...I guess I can't really count 'going to a concert' as something done for educational purposes, though. Now that Lapis thought about it, going to Lyra's concert in three days would be a personal milestone: it would be the very first time, in Equestria at least, that he'd be doing something bigger than a breakfast for his own leisure.

I guess I could think of it as just helping to build myself a safety net. Making some connections, so that I can draw on them in case something goes wrong... no, this isn't just a networking thing. Lapis sighed, pulling the last lantern in the basement off its hook on the wall and staring into the light behind its amber-hued glass. *They saved my life. We threw a monster out a*

window together. We're friends.

Bon Bon and Lyra... they'll miss me, when I leave.

And I think I'll miss them, too.

“Dammit,” Lapis muttered, the start of a throbbing headache beginning to pulse between his temples as he took the lantern up into the closet. “Son of a bitch.”

When Lapis got down into the basement, he was both annoyed and relieved to see exactly what he’d been hoping to see: a few slivers of light poking through the floorboards of his workshop, leading from the center of one wall all the way to the forge at the center of the room.

What Lapis had done earlier, when he went up into the attic, was to take one of the lanterns and lower it down into the pit with the copper rod. And now that he’d taken all the other lanterns out of the basement, he could see - at least in part - where the space for that copper rod was. From that, he could guess where the spare mana collected by the charging array was going, and then he’d be able to sleep in peace, knowing that his home wasn’t secretly a disguise slapped together atop some ancient doomsday machine.

The relief was at the fact that his idea had worked. Lapis was still annoyed, however, because now he had to take a crowbar and pull up his floorboards. He levitated the crowbar off the rack in his closet, then set to work.

I'm getting way too used to being a unicorn, he thought, as he pulled up the first nail. I wonder how long it'll take me to get used to being a human again, once I get back? I'll probably end up getting annoyed that my morning cup of coffee isn't just floating next to my head on its own every morning. ...No, worse than that, I won't be able to fix stuff with magic anymore. I'll just end up holding everything together with duct-tape again. And the longer I stay here, the longer it's going to take for me to adjust...

...And the more reasons Lyra, Bon Bon, and I will end up having to miss each other, Lapis finished, carefully lifting the first board out of the floor. But I don't even know where to start looking for a way back - wait, are those... what?!

Lapis' jaw dropped, and the board clattered to the floor at his side, forgotten. Through the gap where it had been, there was a concrete-lined trench, the sort of opening that Lapis would've called a crawl space if not for the fact that it was big enough for him to stand in. The copper rod was there, making a beeline from the pit in the attic directly to the bottom of the forge, multiple offshoots disappearing into the gray concrete to either side of the pit - but below that...

Slowly, gingerly, Lapis levitated one of the glinting, boxy objects off the first of the four stacks tucked beneath the conducting rod. As it entered the light, any doubt Lapis had vanished - stamped into the surface of the gleaming orange ingot were the words *92% COPPER - 20 LBS - AMBERHOOF*, the outlines of the letters glimmering just enough to read in the faint lamplight.

Not long after, Lapis had another ingot from each of the other three stacks on the floor beside him. Stack number two was also copper ingots, but stacks three and four were iron and aluminum respectively - the former stamped with the logo of some forge in Baltimore, and the latter simply labeled *Pure Griffon Aluminum*. Each stack had at least a dozen or two ingots, and even the aluminum ingot had been heavy enough to dent the wooden floorboards when Lapis dropped it - though, the aluminum was soft enough to be dented by the impact as much as the floor had. Even more unsettling, however, was the *fifth* pile tucked away just beneath the forge: a decent-sized, glittering stack of scratched, clear gemstones, in every color of the rainbow and then some. It was, in short, everything a prospecting artificier needed to practice their craft, and Lapis couldn't have been more aggravated to find it.

Between the headache, re-filing day, Pinkie's apparent ability to see through magic, and now this latest mystery, Lapis suddenly couldn't take it any

more. He sat back on his rump with a thump, his lips moving soundlessly as he tried, and failed, to process the events of the day.

“Who lived here?!” he eventually muttered, staring down at the ingots in disbelief. “How much money did they have? Why be a repair-pony at all, if you could afford all this?! Why hide it under the floor?! I just... I... what?!”

Lapis groaned, then rubbed his forehead with a hoof. *Damn, this headache sucks... alright. Deep breaths. Freaking out isn't going to help with anything. Yes, there's weird stuff in my basement, but at least it's not a doomsday machine. What does all this spare metal mean for me?*

I need to get back home. That's the goal. Before, I thought magic was going to be the biggest thing to help me out, but right now... Lapis' horn stung as his head gave a particularly nasty throb, and he winced. ...Right now, if this is what's going to happen every time I turn invisible for a few seconds, then magic's looking like a big fat no.

Lapis sighed, then looked down at the mysterious piles of spare metal. *I hadn't thought artifice was an option, just because I didn't think I had the spare parts... but now, it just might be. Assuming I can figure out how to work metal without setting myself on fire, anyway.*

Lapis levitated the manual on artifice up from his workbench, and after a moment's hesitation, flipped through to one of the first designs that had seriously caught his interest. It was the first design mentioned in the book, and was described as one of the easier mechanisms to make: a fixed-rate mana siphon. In concept, it wasn't much different from the collector array on Lapis' roof - it extracted magic from a source, and funneled it into a copper rod so that it could be put to use. The difference, though, was the source: the roof was designed not to take magic from ponies, while the mana siphon had been built to draw off the reserves of anything that touched the runed iron rod at its center, even if it was a unicorn grabbing it via telekinesis.

Gotta figure out how to do this somehow, Lapis thought, picking up the iron ingot in a magical field and advancing toward the forge. *Here goes nothing.*

Some people got headaches when they thought too hard. Others got headaches when they worked too hard, or when they did either for too long.

Lapis had gotten headaches in all those ways and then some, but sometimes it was just the opposite - most days, the most surefire way to get himself a headache was to sit around doing nothing for a while. As soon as he got busy, though, either planning some project or carrying it out, it was like his brain... relaxed, somehow. As if it had been cramping up, and the effort was forcing it to stretch back into working condition.

Lapis hadn't been expecting working at a forge for the first time to get rid of his headache. He'd thought the heat of the coals, combined with the deafening, repeated clang of hammer striking hot iron on an anvil, would work to give him the worst headache he'd ever had. And to be fair, the noise had sucked, until Lapis thought to take a spare towel from his closet and wrap it around his head like a turban (sometimes, it wasn't the worst thing in the world to have ears on top of his head instead of on the side).

The heat, though, he'd found he could almost shrug off, as long as he stayed hydrated. And the hammer was still loud even through the blanket, but watching the iron, copper and aluminum deform under every strike, watching the molten-metal putty shape itself into something that looked more and more like the parts of an actual machine, made it worth all the racket.

It had been slow going - multiple times, a clumsy blow had caused a piece to split in two, but Lapis' apparent proficiency for Mend-All spells meant that was only a momentary inconvenience. It was a lucky thing he could pick up glowing hot metal via magic without feeling any of the heat - still, his telekinetic grip wasn't strong enough to actually mold anything but the aluminum with, so he stuck with using the hammer most of the time. (He did, however, spend several unnecessary minutes molding and squeezing the ball of hot aluminum with his magic, not even with a purpose in mind -

it was almost like playing with Play-Doh, except you had to stand two feet away from the play-surface at all times or risk setting yourself on fire.)

When Lapis was finally done, the result was a simple rod encased in aluminum, with a lumpy copper cap at one end and a nub of black iron on the other. Lapis levitated it before his eyes, careful not to telekinetically grasp the iron portion as he looked it over.

The lumps on the copper cap were the product of his own clumsy craftsmanship - the aluminum had been soft enough that he'd been able to smooth out the bumps, but the copper held no such tolerance for fine-tuning, let alone the iron. Still, it was done. Lapis had learned how to use the first few bits of equipment in this forge, and now, he had something to show for it.

The first thing Lapis did was flip to the next page in the book, re-reading the instructions there. Whatever pony had written it, they'd clearly meant it as something more like a lab manual than a textbook - they'd said that, to get any use out of the device, it was best to affix a gemstone onto the copper rod before grasping the iron portion of the siphon; however, they'd left it up to the reader to find out what each different type of gemstone did, advising only that he "save quartz for last." So, Lapis selected one gem of every color of the rainbow - plus a clear diamond, and a significantly less-clear quartz crystal - and set them atop the workbench. He also grabbed a pencil and opened the empty notebook on the workbench to the first page, ready to write down the results of each gemstone.

One at a time, he touched the rod to each gemstone, then grabbed onto the iron portion of the siphon. The first thing he noticed was that he could feel his magical reservoir being depleted, unlike with most telekinesis - it was the same tugging sensation that happened when he cast the Hornlight spell and invisibility, but much less potent.

The ruby was the first gem he funneled some mana into, and it started to faintly glow as he grasped the iron nub of the siphon. At first, nothing seemed to happen - then the wood underneath the gem began smoking. One

frantic bout of slapping the workbench with his towel later, Lapis picked up the pencil and wrote, *Ruby: Heat.*

Next was a small, round drop of amber. It was the only one that Lapis had found in the pile, so he guessed that orange gems were tough to come by. He waited for several seconds, and the amber glowed like it was doing something with the magic he was feeding it, but eventually Lapis ended up pulling the siphon away. *Amber: ???*

Next was a topaz gem. When Lapis initially touched the siphon to the gem, he felt the drain again, and the glow of magic built up much more quickly than with the other gems. Then, suddenly, the light flared, and Lapis yelped in surprise as he shielded his eyes with a hoof, withdrawing the siphon at once. It took three seconds for the afterimage to fade from his eyes, and two more before the gem stopped glowing. *Topaz: light.*

Then came an emerald. Still paranoid thanks to the topaz' effects, Lapis stood well away from his workbench as he touched the siphon to the gem. It turned out, he needn't have worried - the emerald drained a lot of his magic as it lit up, but seemed to do little else besides glow. *Emerald: ???*

The sapphire didn't seem to do much at first, until Lapis looked closer and saw tiny drops of water collecting on its surface. *Sapphire: makes water? Condenses it? Unclear.*

The amethyst lit up a deeper hue of purple than he'd expected, and caused a drop of water that had fallen from the sapphire to roll back across the workbench - then, somehow, fall up onto a facet of the amethyst, where it spread into a sheet. After sprinkling a pinch of coal dust in the vicinity of the crystal, then watching as it was slowly pulled onto the amethyst's surface, Lapis sighed. "Okay. That's probably horrifying if I do the math, but whatever." *Amethyst: Gravity.*

The diamond seemed, at least initially, to do nothing, draining almost no magic from Lapis' reserves as it emitted a faint, starlight-like glow. Then, the edges of the room began to blur, and Lapis grew dizzy enough that he dropped the siphon - and all at once, everything snapped back to normal. *Diamond: acid trip? Brain magic?*

Last was the quartz crystal. It was easily the largest of the crystals from the pile, and between that and the textbook's warning, Lapis couldn't help but feel apprehensive as he lowered the copper cap of the siphon onto its cloudy-white bulk. After a second or two, the quartz crystal lit up - but not in the same way as the other gems. Instead of glowing from within, it became wrapped in a coat of brown magic, as if Lapis were telekinetically grabbing it.

Then, as Lapis felt the quartz continue to pull on his magic, the glow around the crystal grew brighter, more vivid, transitioning from the familiar chocolate hue of his own magic to a warm, creamy yellow, bright and gentle as candlelight. The glow grew around the quartz as the rock slowly levitated off the workbench, Lapis blinking in surprise as the glowing stuff pushed against the mana siphon with considerable force, shifting and churning as it washed out from the crystal's facets, waving in slow, lazy ribbons...

"It's beautiful," Lapis muttered. "Like *Aurora Borealis...*" *And like the princess' mane. Is this raw magic?* Slowly, carefully, he reached out to touch it with a hoof, but found that it pushed back against his weight - the closest he could get to touching the quartz was about an inch, before the force of the magic's flow pushed his hooves away.

Not just raw magic, he realized, as he felt himself slowly growing fatigued. *This is my raw magic.* He relinquished his grip on the mana siphon, and sure enough, the glow of the quartz crystal faded back to his own brown before disappearing entirely, the crystal settling atop the workbench with a gentle, solid thunk.

Lapis heaved a slow, satisfied sigh, a faint smile spreading across his face. *That was me... I did that. All of it - the siphon, the smithing, the magic, everything. Speaking of magic... didn't that reference guide to the Elements of Harmony say something about magical foci?*

Lapis' eyes widened as the page suddenly came to mind, the words returning to his mind with a jolt that felt like lighting. "...What other uses," he muttered, "besides the protection of Equestria, such a powerful set of

magical foci as the Elements could provide. If their use could send a mare to the moon... that's it!"

It was a long shot for sure, but if quartz crystals took magic and spat them out raw, the first thing he could think of to try was to see what happened if he focused a bunch of magic into one place. If that's what the Elements did, then maybe the same thing could be done mechanically!

Lapis grinned. *It's crazy. It'll never work. But it's a start.* He thought for a second, then raised the pencil to the paper.

Quartz: he wrote. *Raw magic, kinetic force...*

He paused briefly, then snorted, rolling his eyes. "...I guess it's not wrong."

Lowering the pencil to paper again, he wrote, *Hope.*

Author's Notes:

Patch Notes:

- Perspective changes were not clearly indicated. This has been fixed, via implementation of horizontal rules (Joyeuse)

Hey, welcome back! This one felt a bit dry to write, mostly because I kept trying to stick bits of next chapter into it, and I had to keep reminding myself not to. Let me ask you this: have you ever wondered what happens when half of a town gets eaten by magic bugs? Because you'd better believe I have. Let's stick with stuff from this chapter just now, though.

Horse sweat does, in fact, work into a foam. This isn't just because of friction, though - horse sweat differs from human sweat in that it contains a compound called latherin, which does exactly what its name implies. Lapis doesn't know that, though, so I didn't work it into his thoughts on being a pony. On a similar note - yes, I know what Lauren Faust said regarding how ponies use the bathroom. While I respect her

authority as a lead creator of the show, I can't help noticing that her explanation doesn't quite fit with the general lack of gardens in, say, Manehattan. Between that, the fact that I've yet to find a section of the show that conforms with her explanation (i.e., shows piles of poop just sitting on the roads), and the fact that Pinkie Pie is shown to have at least some distaste over the prospect of changing diapers when she foalsits Pound and Pumpkin Cake, I decided to officially deviate from canon as follows: in my story, ponies in general are not as laissez-faire about personal hygiene, and as such have invented plumbing, toilets, and toilet paper. (And yes, ponies without horns still use TP - if you care about how it works beyond the fact that it gets done, I invite you to come up with your own theories, as the best two I've got right now are "they can reach back there with their front hooves via cartoon physics," or "like dental floss.")

Moving on, you may have noticed by now that Nikki is pretty quick to smack Lapis upside the ears or face whenever he causes her or himself trouble. This is because real pigeons really will slap you, and I think that's funny.

Maybe I should explain. Pigeons, like dogs, are social animals. Part of being a social animal is the need to communicate displeasure to other animals of your species, like how dogs will whine and growl.

However, pigeons are quieter than dogs (probably about having a slightly longer life expectancy if they don't attract attention, but I'm not a pigeon expert so I don't know). There's a problem, though: they still need a way to tell other pigeons that they would like some space, without bringing the attention of any passing hawks.

Pigeons have found a very simple solution to this problem. A sufficiently irritated pigeon, upon finding their need for space unmet, will turn to one side and raise their wings over their body without fully unfolding them. This gesture serves both as a warning and as preparation for the next step: [pow](#)

Still trying to decide whether Lapis will eventually get wing-slapped by a pegasus - they've got a lot more weight to move than a pigeon does, even with magic, so their wings would be much stronger and the force would be much greater. A casual oh-stop-it swat, if carelessly

delivered, could sting for as long as 45 minutes - and a serious blow from a strong flier might knock the recipient straight to the ground, leaving them bruised and twinging for a week! Might have to save that one for a future Nightmare Night chapter.

Alrighty, that's all for now. Props for reading through this dryest of chapters, and I'll see you in the next one!

7 Minus 1: ...Is Learning Too Little

Yesterday afternoon, Lapis Print had discovered four piles of metal ingots in his basement, and shaped those metal ingots into a mana siphon. This evening, he was taking that mana siphon, a second he'd constructed not long after testing the effects of different gems, and two more he'd cobbled together earlier in the day, and finding out what happened when a whole bunch of magic was all pushed into one place at once.

The mana siphons were the key ingredients for this experiment. Lapis had jerry-rigged a simple frame out of spare lumber and wood screws, shaped into a rough tetrahedron - a three-sided pyramid, with the iron nub of a pump protruding from each corner. *I'd prefer to have a cube, honestly, but for now I'll make do with what I've got.*

Carefully, Lapis moved the pyramid to the center of the workshop, then retreated partway up the stairs, levitating his notebook and a pencil along with him. Flipping to the first blank page, he wrote:

Entry One

- *Objective: Observe the effects of mechanically concentrating magic. Description of the EoH as “magical foci” noted that they were capable of sending living creatures to the moon - focusing magic via less artifact-y means might be equally helpful for transportation.*
- *Hypothesis: No clear prediction for results. However, the desired effect of portal generation will likely not be achieved, because even in Equestria, nothing is ever that easy. Additionally, the mana may leak free of the current frame via the uncovered faces, along the same pathway as the air.*
- *Method: Four mana siphons with mounted-on quartz crystals placed at the vertices of a rough tetrahedron will drain magic from the researcher’s reservoir and release it into the center of the tetrahedron, concentrating it into a central point while allowing air to disperse.*
- *Results:*

“...Time to get some,” Lapis muttered. Taking a deep breath, he turned to face the pyramid, then telekinetically grasped the mana siphons.

At once, he felt the familiar tugging sensation of his magical reserves being drained, and a few seconds later, the mana siphons flared to life, Lapis’ own magic pouring from the four quartz crystals as a shifting, candlelight-colored glow.

Lapis watched intently as the magic collected in the center of the pyramid, blinking away his faint, growing fatigue as the magic coalesced into a luminous orb. *Okay. So far, so good. Looks like magic might prefer to concentrate itself, if it’s really not going to just leak out the open sides-*

A slow, ominous creak echoed through the basement, punctuated by an ominous crackling sound as a dark, jagged line appeared on one of the wooden legs of the frame. *Uh-oh.*

Lapis released his telekinetic grip on the siphons at once, backing further up the stairs. A split second later, there was a crack like a gunshot, and a foot-long shard of wood spun through the space that Lapis had been occupying moments before. It shattered on impact with the stone wall of the basement, Lapis shutting his eyes and turning his head just before his face was showered with splinters.

After five seconds, when nothing exploded, caught fire, or made funny noises, Lapis opened his eyes and crept back into the basement, keeping alert for the slightest sign of any further accidents. The mana siphon at the top of the pyramid seemed to have burst free of its confines, shattering the wood of the tetrahedron in its brief, high-speed quest to touch the ceiling - however, now that Lapis wasn’t feeding it his magic, it was slowly sinking back to the floor, the light that had propelled it fading away as it dropped onto the pile of wood scraps that once had been a frame.

Lapis approached the pile, and levitated up the largest pieces he could find. To his surprise, it wasn’t just the bits of wood attached to the top siphon that had broken - all of them were bowed, their outsides splitting to let their insides arch, as if they’d been sat on by a giant...

“Or,” Lapis muttered, “subjected to high pressure.” He pulled over his notebook, and began to write again:

- *Results: Immediately following siphon activation, the magic expelled by the siphons began to gather into a sphere at the frame’s center. However, approximately fifteen seconds post-activation, the framework developed a large fracture on one wooden beam. The researcher attributes this phenomenon to conflicting thrust produced by the siphons.*
Almost immediately following the development of the fracture, the concentration device underwent rapid unplanned disassembly. While standardized terminology has yet to be discovered, this researcher believes the cause to be something akin to a pressure buildup.
- *Discussion: No portals were generated during the testing process; however, the initial centralization of the mana expelled by the pumps may suggest a natural tendency of mana to gravitate toward itself. Additionally, the mana siphons may yet show promise for the purposes of transportation, if their basic design is modified for thrust generation rather than magic focusing.*

Lapis took a second to look around his workshop again. There was still a dusting of splinters on his face, and piles of fractured wood littered the edges of the room where the other legs had split. He certainly wasn’t going to try repairing the lumber, that would easily be a multiple-hour job - but sweeping it up wasn’t going to be fast, either. He’d have to be quick if he wanted to get to bed on time, and considering Lyra’s concert was the following day, getting his rest would be important.

Lapis sighed, then touched his pencil back to the page, already levitating a broom and dustpan down from the closet. ...*Further research required.*

He hadn’t really been expecting much else to come from his initial test. He’d been expecting failure, mentally braced even for spectacular failure. Or so Lapis had thought, anyway. He was proved wrong just after he was done sweeping up the splinters of the wooden frame, when he was presented with the task of dumping the wreckage of his first serious attempt at getting to Earth into his trash can. Lapis stared down at the rough pile of

splinters and sawdust inside his dustpan, and felt a slow, creeping panic trying to claw its way up his throat.

He took a deep breath and shut his eyes, forcing his fear back down. *It's just trash. I'm not admitting defeat, I'm just cleaning up. I knew it was a long shot when I started, there's no reason for me to get all worked up over it.* And still the wooden shrapnel continued to hover above his trash can, the splinters remaining undumped.

It had been a long shot, alright. It was one of the longest long shots Lapis had ever had. But it was also the only real hope he'd had since he got dumped in Equestria, and it had almost literally blown up in his face. *I knew it wasn't going to work, but I tried it anyway, and it damn well could've killed me! Who knows what the hell else might happen, if I keep going like this? I've gotta be more careful, but if I take too long-*

"I have to do better," Lapis muttered, doing his best to ignore the quiet scratching sounds of the splinters shifting in the dustpan. "I have to get this under control." He took another deep breath, then opened his eyes.

...Had the splinters always been that neatly-piled in the dustpan? They certainly were now, stacked into a tidy, almost deliberate-looking wedge, with the smallest fragments near the front of the dustpan and the largest at the back, near the handle. Lapis found his eyes drawn to one especially jagged-looking shard of torn wood, split almost into a Y by the magical pressure he'd subjected it to.

Carefully, so as not to further break the already-broken wood, Lapis levitated the large chunk of wood out of the dustpan, dumping the rest into the trash can. He carried the shard over to his workbench and laid it near the back, right in the middle, where he'd be able to see it. *Maybe this way, I'll remember to be more careful next time. Make myself something sturdy to duck behind, or something.*

And hopefully, I'll be better able to handle it when things go south. Lapis sighed, then headed upstairs for his bed, his knees suddenly jittery with fatigue. *Maybe.*

When Lapis emerged from his bedroom the following morning, he was surprised to see not one, but three pigeons sitting on the table by the window, having what sounded like a conversation made up entirely of trilling coos and chirps. All three of them looked up as Lapis passed the table, falling silent as if waiting for him to leave.

Lapis frowned, pausing to inspect the trio of birds. One of them was Nikki - her glare was pretty familiar by now - but the other two, he didn't recognize.

"Friends of yours?" Lapis asked, glancing between Nikki and the other two pigeons.

Nikki shrugged, then made a so-so gesture with her wing. Lapis frowned. "O-kay then." *What is this, a gossip club? A meet-up? Does Ponyville have a pigeon mafia or something?*

...Actually, you know what? Nikki's been nice enough not to push too far into my business, so I'll keep my nose out of hers.

"Tell you what, I'm headed to work," Lapis said. "I won't ask any questions about whatever you're doing, just don't make a mess, don't involve Pinkie or her friends, and please try not to set anything on fire. Deal?"

Nikki and the other two pigeons awkwardly glanced at each other for a moment, then Nikki nodded.

"Good," Lapis said, opening his front door and levitating the order slips off his request board as he slung his saddlebags onto his back. "See you when I get back."

He left the building, glancing up and down the street before quickly shuffling through his list of orders. *Lot of banners today, must be some kind of celebration going on... better get these done quick if I want to make*

Lyra's concert this afternoon. Let's see... a roof, as usual. A doorframe with some cracked trim, and... huh. A rabbit hutch? Who owns bunnies?

...Wait a minute.

Lapis frantically checked the order slip, and breathed a relieved sigh when he saw that Fluttershy's name wasn't on it. *Okay, good. Honestly, now that I'm thinking about it, it's kind of a miracle that none of the protagonists have put in a request with me yet. Where are these orders at, anyway?*

He flicked through the order slips. The rabbit hutch was at some house on Cantering Boulevard, while the roof was on a nearby side street. *Can probably knock the both of those out inside of an hour or two, especially if they're both outside. Now, where's that doorframe?*

...Oh, come on!

Lapis paused in the middle of the road, staring down at the order slip as if he could force its address to change through sheer force of will alone. Unfortunately, the pencil lead scrawled across the bottom half of the slip didn't change, the letters stubbornly continuing to spell out the words '*Apple family home, Sweet Apple Acres.*'

Welp. Sorry, Lyra, but it looks like I might be busy all day long. Lapis took a deep breath, set his jaw, and briefly checked over the contents of his saddlebags, making sure his mask was there as he mentally ran through the invisibility incantation. Not that he was expecting to use his mask, of course - he strongly doubted it would work on Applejack.

Still, this would only be his second time doing a repair job on protagonist property - and if fixing Pinkie's table had taught him anything, it was that it paid to be prepared.

Lapis had been to apple orchards before. In Ohio, at least, apple farms were easier to visit than a lot of people expected - often, the same farmers that were crowd-tolerant enough to run pick-your-own-pumpkin patches would

also have a sprawling orchard or two for picking your own apples. He had fond memories of walking up and down the neat rows of lush, shortish trees, watching his breath fog in the crisp autumn air as he looked over the more promising apples for any sign of bugs, then pulling the best selections free of their branch with a clean, satisfying pop before placing them in the basket in his free hand. Maybe it was because they were fresh off the tree, or maybe it had just been in his head - but somehow, apples had always tasted better when he'd picked them himself.

Sweet Apple Acres was like those orchards in that it had apple trees - short, as trees went, the bright, rough ovals of their foliage dotted with the shining red or paler-green shapes of apples. But that's where the similarities ended. Instead of having neat, wide rows built for four-wheelers to ride down, the trees were scattered almost at random, showing no signs of organization besides the gaps or fences between different varieties of apple. In addition, instead of bugs being his primary company, Lapis found that the wildlife he could spot was mostly made up of chipmunks and various birds, with the occasional squirrel darting up or down one of the apple trees' narrow trunks.

Although... it was odd, but the animals didn't seem to be foraging. Lapis frowned as he watched one of the squirrels run right past three or four promising apples to a hole in the tree trunk, pull a good four acorns from its cheeks and stuff them in the hole, then squeeze itself inside and hurriedly yank a leaf over the entrance. *It's the wrong weather for that, but this almost looks like they're getting ready for a storm. Maybe it's just the wrong time of year for foraging or something? No, wait, squirrels just don't eat apples - but then, why are they over here?*

In any case, Lapis had bigger things to worry about than the wildlife. The Apple family house - a large building that looked for all the world like an oversized, complicated barn - was just visible over the top of a hill now, and Lapis wasted no time trying to come up with a plan of attack. Applejack wasn't anywhere Lapis could see yet, which worried him - if he didn't know where she was, that meant she could descend on him at any minute.

He paused, then warily looked around himself. *Nope, nowhere around here. Besides, if she were working in these orchards, I'm pretty sure I'd hear her -*

she usually harvests the apples by kicking the trees real hard, if I remember right.

Lapis sighed, advancing up the hill toward the barn. *So that means I've gotta get up there and peek through the windows to see if she's there, and hope that she and the rest of her family don't see me acting like a weirdo-There!*

Lapis hastily ducked behind a tree as Applejack stepped out of one of the barn's side doors. She took off her Stetson hat for just long enough to duck under the yoke of a decent-size, empty cart, then hastened down the hill at a right angle from Lapis' approach, toward an extra-full cluster of apple trees. It was hard to tell from where he was, but Applejack's face looked... confused? Annoyed?

Whatever's going on, it's going on away from me, Lapis thought. And if I'm fast enough, hopefully that'll be all I need to worry about.

...Although, if I did have to make contact with a protagonist, it'd probably be Applejack, Lapis realized as he hurried up the hill. Based on what I've seen of her during the Summer Sun Celebration, she's pretty well inclined to keep the wild cards of the group in check, so hopefully that'd extend to not making too much trouble for me, either. Plus, she ends up working up here most of the time, so I likely wouldn't end up seeing much of her, either. Still, it's too much of a risk.

Lapis waited until he could see Applejack working on the cluster of apple trees before he gently knocked on the door to the Apple family home. A few moments later, the door slowly, creakily opened, revealing an elderly, pale-green mare squinting at him from behind it. "...Who is it?"

"Oh, good morning, Granny Smith," Lapis said, recognizing the tight no-nonsense bun of the mare's mane. "It's the repair-pony. I hear there's a doorframe that needed fixed?"

Granny Smith's squint deepened. "Ah remember yeh. Yer the pony who fixed mah cookin'-pot, weren't yeh?"

“That’d be me,” Lapis said. “Thanks again for helping make that oatmeal for the town, it was delicious.”

“Mm.” Granny Smith creaked back from the doorway, pulling the door open behind her. “Ah know which door yeh’re talkin’ about, but it wasn’t me who called yeh here. Lemme show yeh to yer job, then Ah’ll get Macintosh to come see to payin’ yeh.”

“Thanks a bunch,” Lapis said. *...Does she not like me or something? I mean, yeah, I offended her about the oatmeal, but there's no way she holds a grudge for that long, right?*

It didn’t take too long of a walk before Granny Smith and Lapis reached the doorframe in question. Lapis spotted the problem at once - the trim-piece at the edge of the floor had warped away from the wall, likely thanks to humidity. He could see the painted-over tacks jutting from the underside of the board, and grimaced at the sight of the wood that the tacks had been embedded in - it was dark from moisture, and looked almost spongy to the touch. *...Yeah, that's bad news. Not sure how I'll fix that one, but I've come all this way, so I may as well try.*

“Ah told Macintosh to just git a new board and stick it on,” Granny Smith said, “but he was keen on lettin’ yeh try yer hooves first. Said somethin’ about not likin’ the look of the wood underneath.”

Lapis pulled a screwdriver from his saddlebags and gave the wood a firm poke, then winced at the droplet of moisture that rolled down the length of the tool. “Yeah, I’m sorry to say it, but I think he had good reason. Not sure why, but there’s a lot of moisture buildup in this wood - I’ll do my best to get that trim-piece back in, but if I were you, I don’t think I’d plan on living in this building much longer. Might not be safe.”

Granny Smith snorted, but Lapis saw her ears twitch back for a fraction of a second. “Nonsense. This barn’s got strong timbers. It’s stood strong fer fifty-odd years, and it’ll stand fer another ten yet.”

“Well, the timbers might stand, but it’s more the floor and walls I’m worried about. If there’s this much water damage down here, who knows

where else it's gotten to," Lapis said. "Especially considering that you're uphill - it's pretty tough for water to seep into anything at the top of a hill, so if it has, then it's gathering somewhere. If you have a cellar, maybe, I'd check for flooded rooms. ...And then, otherwise, I'd stay out of the cellar as much as I could, considering what kind of bad shape the floor might be in," he added on. "Of course, I'd get a second opinion before you take my word for it, but that's what I'm suspecting."

"Huh," Granny Smith grunted, beginning the slow, creaky process of turning toward the door. "'Spose Ah best leave yeh to it an' check the cellar, then. Lemme get Macintosh, an' then Ah'll git outta yer mane."

"Thanks," Lapis said. "And I'm sorry for the bad news."

Granny Smith hmphed. "Don' be sorry. Not like yer the reason fer any of it." She tottered off, leaving Lapis staring at the piece of warped trim.

I know Mend-Alls can put together broken things, but... unbending bent things? Lapis sighed, then carefully gripped the trim piece with his telekinesis. *Let's find out.*

Slowly, cautiously, Lapis began trying to straighten out the trim - and, to his dismay, it snapped almost immediately. Closer inspection of the break revealed that the trim-piece, too, was saturated. *Wow, this building's basically made of wet cardboard at this point, huh?*

Lapis put the pieces back together, and they repaired themselves with the usual flash of light - then, he tried to straighten the board, only to find it snap along the same line. *Well, shit. Looks like I'll need to point them to a professional carpenter.*

"Lapis?" a deep voice asked. Lapis blinked, then turned around to find a well-built earth-pony stallion with a maroon coat and an orange mane poking his head into the room. Lapis recognized the other stallion immediately - it was Big Macintosh, the pony who'd burnt his hooves propping up a cauldron full of oatmeal during the Summer Sun Celebration.

“Hey, Big Mac,” Lapis said, carefully setting down the trim-piece. “How’s it going? Your hooves heal up okay?”

“E-yup,” Big Mac replied, stepping the rest of the way into the room and grinning. “Was hopin’ Ah’d see you before the next time somethin’ near me was broken, but Ah s’pose Ah’ve been keepin’ busy.”

“You and me both,” Lapis replied, grimacing. “I swear, if I have to patch one more pegasus-shaped hole in somepony’s thatch, I’ll start talking to Mayor Mare about restricting the airspace above Ponyville. But anyway, yeah, I would’ve come and found you if I got a spare moment...”

And if you weren’t literally working next to a protagonist for about as long as I’ve been here.

“...it might’ve saved me from having to deliver some bad news like this,” Lapis finished.

Big Mac nodded, his face grim as he glanced at the trim-piece. “E-yup. Ah s’pect Ah already know what it is, but go on and tell me anyway, just in case.”

Lapis relayed his suspicions about the state of the house’s stability, and though Big Mac’s face appeared to remain stoic, Lapis thought he saw a faint tightness building around the bigger stallion’s eyes as he spoke, and especially as he briefly broke and re-mended the trim-piece to demonstrate his point.

“...So, assuming Granny Smith finds what I think she’ll find, I’d start worrying about finding the lumber for a new house,” Lapis finished.

“E-yup,” Big Mac replied. Then he sighed. “And we just finished buckin’ the Gala orchards. Applejack won’t be glad to hear this.”

“Granny Smith certainly wasn’t,” Lapis replied. “...Speaking of her, you think she’s mad at me or something? She didn’t seem too glad to see me.”

“Nope. She’s just happier when us Apples can take care of ourselves,” Big Mac replied, half a crooked grin curling across his face. “She was here when Ponyville was built, an’ helped build the town into what it is today. It’s as like as not that she helped raise this barn.”

“Oh. Yeah, I get it,” Lapis said, glancing around the building again. “Quite the achievement - this house and the whole town, I mean. Fixing this stuff on a regular basis kinda drives home how much work must’ve gone into it all.”

“E-yup. Nopony builds a town alone, though,” Big Mac responded. “...Say, what’re you up to today?”

“More than I’m comfortable with, but it’s not all work,” Lapis replied. “I’ve got a roof to patch up and a rabbit hutch to look over, but once those are done, I’ll be headed to a little concert - a friend of mine is performing. You?”

“Well, Ah figured Ah might go out and about in town today,” Big Mac said, “what with Princess Celestia comin’ to visit and all.”

Lapis immediately felt his brain short-circuit. “Wait, she’s doing what? Here? Today?”

“You didn’t hear?” Big Mac asked. “Well, she is. That’s what all those banners and flower-baskets are about for.”

“Huh,” Lapis muttered, doing his best to suppress his rising panic. “Well, uh, here’s hoping it goes better than last time.”

Big Mac chuckled. “E-yup. Though, if you wanna get those jobs done ‘fore she arrives, Ah suppose Ah’d better not keep you here too long.”

“Uh, yeah,” Lapis said, glancing over at the trim-piece. “Thanks for the heads-up, and... well, listen, I know there’s usually a fee involved with getting me to come over, but seeing as I wasn’t really able to fix anything, and you’re probably going to need all the spare bits you can get, there’s no charge.”

Big Mac grinned that crooked grin again. “One more thing for Granny Smith to be grumpy over, but Ah’ll thank you for it. Now get on outta here, ‘fore the princess arrives.”

“Right. See you around, Big Mac!” Lapis said, turning for the door.

“C’mon back now, ya hear?” Big Mac replied, just as Lapis reached the front door. He glanced around for any sign of Applejack, then hurried on his way down the hill towards Ponyville, his mind racing as the last thing Princess Celestia had said to him echoed in his head:

“I look forward to seeing you again, Lapis Print.”

The first place that Lapis went, once he got back to Ponyville, was his shop. If Princess Celestia really was coming here again, he needed to keep her as far away from his base of operations as possible, just in case she would somehow be able to glean anything from it about who, or what, Lapis was. Ergo, he’d need to swap out his tools now, so that he wouldn’t have to do it again until after she left.

Lapis trotted up to the door of his shop, pausing briefly to inspect the three-pointed arch of blue trim he’d finally set up around his front door. He hadn’t had any further griffon guests yet, but he was sure they’d happen eventually.

Shrugging, Lapis pushed the door open - and stopped in his tracks, the sight of what was beyond his door pushing all other thoughts from his mind.

Inside his house, there were dozens - if not hundreds - of pigeons, gathered together like a feathery blanket atop every spare inch of open space that wasn’t the floor, their quiet coos and murmurs overlapping into a hushed hubbub that almost reminded Lapis of a busy library. As he watched, a few of the pigeons took notice of him, letting loose a hurried flurry of calls and trills that drove the other birds in the building to fall silent and look up at him.

“...Nikki?!” Lapis called. “Could you come here a second?!”

The sound of wingbeats started emerging from Lapis’ bedroom, and a moment later, Nikki fluttered out of the hallway to land on the floor in front of Lapis, shooting an unimpressed look at him as if to say ‘Yeah?’

“Alright, I know I said I wouldn’t ask what you’re up to,” Lapis said, stepping inside and shutting the door, “and I’m still not going to. I just need to know- whatever’s going on here, is it a temporary thing, or-?”

Nikki nodded, and Lapis pressed on. “Okay, good. Cool. Apparently, Princess Celestia’s coming to visit Ponyville today, so I’m probably not going to be back in the building for a while. I’m just here to swap out some of my tools, and then I’ll be out of... all your collective feathers,” Lapis said, looking around at the assembled masses of pigeons. “Again, I’m not going to ask what’s going on, but... all your friends here know what a toilet is, right?”

One of the pigeons on Lapis’ table let out an outraged squawk. Nikki shot the offender a flat look, causing them to fall silent mid-screech, then she nodded at Lapis again.

“Okay, good,” Lapis said, rubbing his forehead and levitating his tools out of his saddlebag and into the rack on the closet. “And just to make sure the entire flock knows, the conditions for staying here are: don’t make a mess, don’t set anything on fire, and don’t get the attention of Pinkie and her friends. All of you got it?” he asked, turning to look around at all the other pigeons in the building.

The flock of pigeons responded in the affirmative, either via nodding or by a quick, hushed coo. Lapis levitated a pair of scissors, a tube of glue (which was, as far as he could tell, not made from anything sinister), and a small box of horseshoe-shaped pins out of his closet, quickly tucking them into his saddlebags alongside a small rubber mallet, a dense roll of twine, and a narrow-pointed brush. “Alright, good. I’m heading out now. Nikki, if there’s any trouble, come get me, okay?”

Nikki nodded again, and Lapis headed out the door again. He glanced over his shoulder just in time to watch some of the pigeons taking up posts at each of his windows, looking at the skies above as if keeping watch. The sight of a couple of the birds fluttering out of his chimney almost gave him pause, but he forced himself to turn away and start for Cantering Boulevard. *Nope. Not going to ask.*

The roof job went exactly as Lapis expected, and the rabbit hutch turned out to have a corner of its chicken-wire mesh pulled out of place. Both were easily attended to, and Lapis was pleased to find himself done before noon. *Should give me enough time to get to Town Hall for the concert, he thought, starting in that direction-*

“Hey, Lapis! Over here!”

Lapis paused, frowning as he recognized Lyra’s voice, and looked around for her. He spotted her and Bon Bon almost immediately; they were sitting at a table just outside one of the nearby stores, just across the road from him - unfortunately, that store happened to be Sugarcube Corner Bakery.

Bon Bon must’ve guessed what was wrong, because she rolled her eyes and said, “Pinkie’s not over here, Lapis. We were just in there, and we haven’t seen her all day.”

Oh. Lapis heaved a quick sigh of relief, then trotted over to their table. “Hey, guys. What’re you over here for, I thought that the concert was today.”

“Well, it was,” Bon Bon said. “It got cancelled.”

“Two of the big acts’ musical instruments went missing,” Lyra added, her ears tucking back. “Lonely Road lost his harmonica, and Quick Hoof can’t find her banjo. I’ve still got my lyre, though!” she said, grinning and levitating a small, horseshoe-shaped harp up to her side.

“It might’ve saved me some trouble, too,” Bon Bon said, tucking her own ears back and looking to the side. “I must have gotten a bad recipe for pecan bars, because what I pulled out of the oven was just a block of burnt nuts and sugary goop. It took forever to scrape out of the baking pan,” she finished, shivering.

“Anyway, how’s your day been, Lapis?” Lyra asked. “Any interesting repair jobs?”

Lapis grimaced. “Well, ‘interesting’ isn’t the word I’d use, but the Apple family might find themselves out of a house for a while.”

“What?” Bon Bon asked, pulling her head back, Lyra blinking in surprise.

“Not sure how, or why, but at least some of the timbers on the bottom floor of their house is waterlogged,” Lapis said, taking a seat by the table. “I don’t know much about architecture, but from what I do know, that’s bad news for the structural integrity of the building.”

“No kidding,” Bon Bon muttered, tapping her chin with a hoof. “Wow. Well, I’m sure they’ll be able to find somepony to host them somewhere in Ponyville.”

“Twilight’s library has more spare rooms than you’d think,” Lyra said, perking up. “There’s a whole basement and everything! I accidentally wandered down there during Pinkie’s Welcome-To-Ponyville party...” She paused, cocking her head. “Hey, wait a second. Lapis, isn’t Applejack a friend of Pinkie’s? Have you given up on the whole avoiding-her-friends thing?”

Lapis firmly shook his head. “Nope. I got lucky - Applejack was heading into the orchard with an empty cart at about the same time that I was headed over to their house.”

Lyra frowned, a worried crease forming on her brow, and Bon Bon groaned, leaning forward and tucking back her ears. “Lapis, this is ridiculous, and you know it. Could you please introduce yourself to Pinkie already? I promise you, it’ll save you a lot more time and effort than you think.”

“Okay,” Lapis sighed, facehoofing, “I see your point... but, maybe we should take a second to run through the list of stuff that Pinkie’s done. First off, she’s been chasing me on sight ever since I showed up in Ponyville-”

“Only because you somehow escaped from her the first time she spotted you,” Lyra said, raising a hoof.

“-continuing up to, and including, earlier this week, when I only managed to escape from her by way of combining the mask with an invisibility spell. And that nearly gave me a headache for the rest of the night,” Lapis finished. Bon Bon’s eyebrows raised in surprise, but Lapis pushed on. “Bon Bon, you said on the morning of the Summer Sun Celebration that Pinkie’s broken into ponies’ houses and unpacked their stuff so she could host parties there, and I can personally confirm that she’s broken into my house, while I was in it, for no apparent purpose besides nearly eating a whole batch of scones and doing my dishes.”

Lyra’s eyes widened, her ears tucking back as she stared down at the table, and Lapis decided it was time to drive his point home. “So, yeah. I get that the two of you are basically okay with her, and I don’t know how much of her behavior the two of you have seen. But from the parts of it I’ve seen, I feel justified in thinking she might be kinda crazy, and in being more than a little scared of her.”

“Well, she’s definitely a little crazy,” Bon Bon muttered.

“But Pinkie means well, I promise,” Lyra added, though her ears stayed tucked back. “She just wants to make sure you feel welcome, Lapis.”

“She does,” Lapis agreed. “But right now, she’s making me feel like I’m being hunted, and it’s going to take a while for me to get past that. A long while, if she keeps up the way she has been.”

Lyra opened her mouth to respond, but at that moment, a pastel-blue mare with a pink mane walked up to the table, bearing two plates - one with a slice of cake, and one with a slice of pie - on her back. “Order for Misses Heartstrings and Bon?”

“That’s us. Thank you, Mrs. Cake,” Bon Bon said, as the mare set the plates on the table. Mrs. Cake glanced over at Lapis once she was done. “And anything for you, dear?”

“No thanks,” Lapis said, though he was starting to feel a little hungry. “I’m just chatting with some friends.”

“Well, I’ll leave the three of you to it!” Mrs. Cake chimed, turning to walk back into the bakery.

Bon Bon waited until she was gone, then turned back to Lapis, who was just starting to stand up. “Hey, where are you headed?”

Lapis paused. He’d been about to head to his shop again, to try and come up with some means of steering clear of the Princess, but he couldn’t well just say that. “...Well, for some reason, Nikki’s got just about every pigeon in Ponyville holed up in my shop, and I was going to go check up on them.”

Bon Bon frowned. “That’s... odd. I guess I’d better not stop you, but before you go... when’d you learn an invisibility spell? Aren’t those specialist material, or something?”

“Yeah, they’re definitely tougher,” Lapis muttered, wincing as he recalled the headache. “I learned it not long after I picked up the Hornlight spell - the Hornlight made light magic seem easy enough, I thought I’d try another spell from that school. Turns out, not so much. Anyway, yeah, I’d better get out of here,” Lapis said, turning to leave. “There’s probably enough loose pigeon feathers on my floor to stuff a pillow with, and I’d rather sweep it up before it gets into the nooks and crannies.”

Bon Bon snorted. “That’d be a small pillow. ...Hey, be careful on your way back, yeah?”

Lapis cocked an eyebrow. “Careful? How come?”

“I’ve been seeing animals acting skittish all day,” Bon Bon said. “...It’s just a hunch, but I get the feeling something might be about to happen. Besides the Princess showing up, I mean.”

At once, Lapis remembered the strange behavior of the critters he'd seen on Sweet Apple Acres, and a familiar tingle began to build in his gut. "...Yeah, me too. Thanks, Bon Bon. If anything comes up, I'll try to send Nikki your way."

"I'll look out for her," Bon Bon called, as Lapis started back for his workshop at a quick trot.

Is it just me, Lapis thought as he headed back to his house, or does Bon Bon have a weirdly specific patchwork of knowledge?

The animals thing, he could explain on his own - all it took was growing up somewhere with woods nearby to figure out that the wildlife was better at predicting natural trouble - or natural disasters - than people were. Calling invisibility spells "specialist material" was a little strange, though: knowing in the first place that invisibility spells were difficult didn't too improbable to Lapis, though he wasn't familiar with how much magical knowledge most non-unicorns possessed.

But describing them as "specialist material" is kind of a... well, specialized use of language, Lapis realized, his brow furrowing as he turned the corner onto his shop's street. And... when I was talking to her about my overdue fines at the library, didn't she say something about the "base fine for petty theft?"

"Maybe she was a cop, or something?" Lapis muttered, glancing down at the ground - then he paused. ...*Why does the ground have polka dots?*

Lapis looked up, and realized that the polka dots were shadows - the shadows of dozens, maybe hundreds of small, spherical objects gently floating down from the sky. Lapis watched as one of them, a fuzzy, pale yellow ball, drifted right in front of his face - then it stopped there as the narrow, translucent wings on its sides began to buzz.

"What?" Lapis muttered. The fuzzy ball shifted, opening a large, glittering pair of compound eyes and a small, smiling mouth, which opened to release

a faint, buzzing chirrup.

Lapis would've thought it was cute, but as he looked around at the cloud of creatures raining down on Ponyville from above, all he could focus on was that familiar tingle of dread in his gut. "When did I see you before..."

Then, off to one side, one of the bugs stretched its mouth impossibly wide, its gaping maw lunging forward to engulf the raised hoof of a small foal. For a second, Lapis' heart stopped - then the bug popped off, revealing that the foal's hoof was soaked with drool but otherwise unharmed, and the candy-apple that they'd been holding had been stripped down to a popsicle stick and a pile of seeds.

"Oh, shit," Lapis muttered, a jolt of realization shooting through him. In the next second he was galloping back to his shop at full speed, screams rising around him to punctuate an growing buzz like an industrial shredder, that seemed to come from every direction. He burst through the door to his shop just as a pair of pigeons swooped down out of his fireplace, releasing frantic squawks.

Oh, well this explains the pigeons, a small, detached mind of Lapis' brain commented. Somehow, they knew this was coming. They're taking shelter. They never warned me, because I didn't ask. Maybe I should ask about stuff more often.

"Hey, guys, I think I figured out why you're in here," Lapis shouted, slamming the door behind him and slinging his saddlebags onto their hook, levitating his broom out of the closet and staring around at the crowd of pigeons that surrounded him. "I'm pretty sure they can't open doors, so... none of you open the door, I guess?"

Nikki cooed as she flew down onto Lapis' head, and wasted no time glaring down at him over his horn. "Right," Lapis muttered. "You can't open doors, either. Okay, uh, however you all got in here, I need you to guard those spots, and get me if they start coming in that way so I can do something about it. Ready?"

The flock of pigeons exchanged doubtful glances. Then, they and Lapis both turned to look as a series of pinkish-purple waves of light started washing through the wall, Lapis' horn tingling as it passed through him. He glanced outside, and saw that all the bug-things had stopped midair, looking almost confused as pulse after pulse of magic flowed over their bodies.

Then the pulses stopped. One of the bugs turned away from a pony's sandwich and flew over to Lapis' door, and for a brief, beautiful second, Lapis thought the crisis was averted.

Then the bug flew downward, and in a single bite that scraped like nails on a chalkboard, it ate his metal doorknob.

"...O-kay then," Lapis breathed. "New plan, anyone?"

A second later, the door began to swing open, and suddenly all was chaos. Lapis slammed himself against the door, holding it shut even as a half-dozen panicked coos began to sound across the room. Lapis gritted his teeth, looking out through the giant window of his storefront, and he felt his heart drop as he saw the bugs biting chunks out of the corner of his house-

"Stay inside!" he yelled, and before he knew when or how he'd done it, he was outside, using his telekinesis to hold the door shut even as he started whacking the bugs off the corners of his house with the broom. It was a small relief they didn't seem to be touching his roof, or Lapis himself - still, at the speed they were gnawing, he was going to end up with some unwanted doorways. Lapis started making frantic circles of the house, spinning the broom in circles like a weed-whacker to smack the bugs off his walls, but they just kept coming-

Nikki was there as he rounded a corner, swooping toward one of the offending things and making a sharp right turn just in time to deliver a resounding smack with the flat of her wing. The bug got knocked fifteen feet clear in the opposite direction of Lapis' house, Lapis sending four more in its direction as Nikki wheeled around to make another pass. He blinked,

shocked, as a fifth bug was launched away, and then a sixth. Two more pigeons followed behind Nikki, then four, then a dozen-

And all at once, his house was engulfed by a swooping, squawking whirlwind of pigeons and bugs, the papery buzzing of the insects' wings like a bass line under the irregular staccato of the birds' broad strikes. The bugs that got slapped didn't come back, but there were just more and more taking their place, several of the pigeons settling to the ground and opening their beaks to pant for breath even as the bugs grew more numerous, the small cloud that split off to pursue a screaming blue blur doing nothing to diminish their numbers. Lapis set his jaw, raising the broom again even as he felt himself starting to grow tired, and-

Suddenly, the cacophony gained a melody. Lapis paused, cocking his head, and realized that somewhere, someone was playing music. It sounded like a whole marching band, complete with tuba and cymbals, but that was ridiculous, surely nobody-

The bugs began bobbing up and down in the air, and after a few seconds' consternation, Lapis was more bewildered yet by the realization that they were dancing. Slowly, still bobbing to the beat, the bugs touched down on the ground and started hopping down the street, in the direction of the song. Lapis looked along their path just in time to see Pinkie Pie, of all ponies, slowly cross the street about a hundred yards down the road, wearing half an orchestra's worth of instruments on her body, and a look on her face that he'd never seen before: one that said she was *done* with this mess.

And for some reason, somehow, the bugs began to hop along behind her single file, following Pinkie as she slowly, deliberately bounced across the street. She didn't even bother to glance in Lapis' direction, only her song lingering behind as she rounded a corner and disappeared from view.

Lapis slowly, carefully looked around, panting with exertion as he swept the street for any sign of the bugs. And, amazingly, there was none - it seemed they'd all vanished, or else followed Pinkie to... wherever she was going. All Lapis knew was that she was going away, and that was good enough for him.

The street was trashed, though. Lapis grimaced as he took in the sight of the houses surrounding his - there were trails eaten through the thatch of ponies' roofs, rafters jutting from beneath the torn sheets of straw. Everywhere the bugs had found corners, they'd eaten them - most of the stairs that he could see had been smoothed out into ramps, and small, cookie-cutter holes were visible all over every piece of trim and siding he could see. And the gardens... well, they might still make good compost, but that was about it.

With some trepidation, Lapis turned to look at his own house - and found it to be in shockingly good condition. He still had some chunks missing from his walls, but his house didn't look nearly as Swiss-cheesed as the rest of the buildings around him, the worst of the damage seeming to be a few bites that had been taken out of the trim around his door.

Slowly, beginning to breathe more deeply, Lapis looked down and saw the crowd of pigeons sitting around the edges of his house. Most of them had risen to their feet, but a few were still spread-eagled on the ground, their tiny chests shivering as they tried to catch their breath. Nikki was among those who'd gotten their strength back, and after briefly ruffling her wings, she flew up onto his back, a triumphant smirk on her face as she took in the face of Lapis' house.

"...I know I told you to stay inside, but... thanks," Lapis said. "All of you," he added, looking down at the rest of the pigeons, who called out a few exhausted trills in response. "Alright, good work, everybody take five."

Lapis was only barely surprised to learn that the pigeons seemed to know what this meant, most of them taking for the skies at once, those that remained only moving to hop or scoot out of Lapis' way, Nikki remaining on Lapis' back as he slowly, gingerly re-entered his house. The inner half of Lapis' doorknob fell off the door as he opened it, rolling loudly across the wooden floorboards before stopping against the far wall with a thunk. Miraculously, nothing else seemed damaged - there was a light dusting of pigeon feathers all over the floor, and something in a corner of the room that might've been a dropping, but nothing had chunks bitten out of it... except the firewood inside Lapis' closed wood-stove.

I don't remember closing that, Lapis thought, ducking down to look through the glass window of the wood-stove. *Did the pigeons do it?*

"Gotta say, Nikki, you pigeons know how to defend a house," Lapis muttered, Nikki quietly shuffling on his back. *They must've, yeah - the chimney, that must be how all the pigeons got inside! Yeah, and then they shut the door behind them when the bugs showed up-*

Lapis felt his blood run cold. "There are two rooms that connect to that chimney," he muttered.

He turned around, marching to the closet, levitating the broom up to his side as he pulled open the closet door and stepped inside. Then, he shut the door behind him as he descended the basement stairs, entering the lantern-lit room to see...

Chaos.

Everything that had been on a hook, wasn't. The bugs had eaten half of the set of hammers - literally, they had taken each hammer and eaten it in half - and gnawed the hooks off the walls. Paper and metal scraps were strewn about the room, tools haphazardly scattered across what had once been tidy workspaces, the floorboards looking more worm-eaten than the timbers of the Apple family's house had.

"You're kidding me," Lapis muttered, the corners of his mouth twitching upward as he looked around the room. "You've gotta be joking." He advanced toward the workbench, his heart dropping as he realized all three of the books on his workbench were open.

Lapis frantically grabbed the first of the books - the worn notebook with blank pages that he'd discovered on the bench when he moved in - and was only slightly relieved to see that all the eaten pages had been blank to begin with. Trixie's copy of Magic 4 Dummies, however, wasn't so lucky - there were multiple chunks bitten out of the edges, as if the bugs had been trying to nibble the crust off a sandwich. They'd seemed to have a taste for the

binding - most of it was gone, and loose pages kept trying to fall out of the book as Lapis inspected it.

Lapis took a moment to look back at Nikki. She seemed as aghast as he was, staring around the destroyed room with wide eyes. She looked back over at him, then released a sorrowful coo.

“Hey, it’s not your fault,” Lapis said, forcing himself to grin back at her. “I wouldn’t have remembered it either.”

Then, slowly, he took a deep breath and picked up the guide to artifice, fearing the worst... and found that, somehow, it looked undamaged. Whatever it was bound in, the bugs didn’t seem to have liked the taste - there were a few rings of tiny, serrated tooth-marks, but none had bitten deeper than a scratch or two. Lapis opened the book-

For a second or two, he couldn’t move. “Nikki?” Lapis asked.

Nikki hopped up onto Lapis’ shoulder, but remained silent. “I think... they *ate* the words.”

The pages were undamaged, without so much as a scratch on them. But the paragraphs of text looked as if they had chunks bitten out of them, as if the bugs had scraped the ink off the paper with their teeth. Slowly, carefully, Lapis began to flip through the book, and found that every single page of text had been eaten at least in part.

“They did,” Lapis muttered, the corners of his mouth twitching up, his throat clenching shut against the hysterical laugh rising in his chest. “They ate them. They couldn’t eat the book, so they ate the words.”

There were pages of information about artifice in that book, Lapis thought, and the laugh died in his chest, smothered out by something that pulsed with heat. Pages. Pages of knowledge, instructions, information about how to keep trying, to make magic work in a way that didn’t leave my head pounding, to try and-

Something metal clanged to the floor behind Lapis, and he gasped- then found he couldn't breathe. He fell, and he never hit the ground, rising with the heat in his chest, hot enough to char, his vision going white as it pounded past his eyes and reached his horn-

His head was splitting open. His magic ripped itself free of his body, bursting away from his horn in a wave of candelight, every loose object shuddering and churning around him like sand on a vibrating dish. Another pulse washed from his horn, and then another, the edges of Lapis' vision darkening as he continued to choke, his own magic tearing his strength from his body as it ripped the light of the world away from his eyes.

"You good, Lyra?" Bon Bon asked, panting for breath as she slung the fluffy pink towel back over her back.

"Uh, I think so," Lyra replied. "...They ate a chunk out of my tail, though?"

Bon Bon looked back at Lyra, saw the crescent-shaped bite taken out of her tail hairs, and sighed. "Yes, you're good."

"Great!" Lyra replied, setting down the plate she'd been using to swat away bugs. Bon Bon had been surprised - Lyra was a pretty good hoof, or horn, with that plate. *Wonder how well she could do with a shield?*

Lyra glanced down to her side and gasped, her ears perking up as a grin lit her face. "Hey, look!" Her horn lit up orange, and a second or two later, her lyre floated up in front of her chest, Lyra beaming at Bon Bon. "At least the bugs didn't get this, right?"

I hope I never find out, Bon Bon thought, a smile growing on her face.
"Yeah. At least that's true."

"What were those, anyway?" Lyra asked, glancing around at their surroundings. "They were kinda cute, but they did a real number on Ponyville."

“I... don’t have a clue,” Bon Bon found herself admitting. *I’ll have to submit a report... Sweet Celestia, I’m never going to hear the end of this one.* “But whatever Pinkie did to stop them, it worked. Guess we’ll have to ask her, next time she drops by for a sweet exchange.”

“Ooh!” Lyra said, her eyes widening. “Wonder what we could swap with her for those meringue cookies!”

Bon Bon opened her mouth to reply - and a wave of magic burst from the middle of the village. Lyra turned to look, her mouth widening in shock, as Bon Bon lunged at her, shoving a table to the side as she knocked Lyra to the ground, hoping it would shield her and Lyra from the wave.

It didn’t. The wave passed right through the table, and Bon Bon clamped her hooves to her cheeks as something in her mouth jerked, a spike of pain penetrating past her gum and into her jaw. *What the hay?!*

Another pulse washed over Bon Bon, her hair standing on end. Then another, and another... and no more.

“Ow,” Lyra wheezed. “Bon Bon... can’t breathe...”

“Lyra?!” Bon Bon shouted, bolting to her hooves - and Lyra sat up immediately, sucking in a gasp. “Whoo! That was exciting - maybe save the tackle-hugs for pillow fights, though?”

Bon Bon huffed, facehoofing as her jaw continued to throb, her pulse pounding in her ears. “Lyra, I swear to Celestia... Don’t scare me like that!”

“Hey, you’re the pony who landed on my stomach,” Lyra replied, grinning. “...What was that, anyway?”

Bon Bon felt around the inside of her mouth, and her confusion only grew. “Whatever it was, I think it straightened out my crooked tooth.”

“Um...” Lyra said, not meeting Bon Bon’s eyes as she clambered to her hooves. “It might not just be your tooth.”

“What?” Bon Bon asked, then she caught sight of her reflection in a window, and got to watch the glare melt off her face. “...My mane, too?”

“Well, yeah, that, too.” Lyra said. “And maybe some other stuff.”

Bon Bon turned to look, and felt her eyes widen as she stared down the street.

The bugs hadn’t left behind much debris- most of what they’d destroyed, they’d eaten shortly afterward, with the exception of some food and what had been a scattered patch of acorns.

Except, now... they weren’t scattered at all. Nothing was. All the litter on the streets had been gathered into perfectly straight lines, some criss-crossing like a chessboard while others stretched long and unbroken down the road. On top of that, there was new litter on the streets: piles of pointed, vivid green strips...

“Grass clippings?” Lyra said, cocking her head. “Man, somepony picked a weird time to test a lawn-mowing spell.”

“What do you mean, lawn-mowing...” Bon Bon began, but as she looked, she saw what Lyra meant. Not only had all the litter been organized, but all the lawns had been mowed perfectly level with each other, as if somepony with too much time on their hooves had taken a ruler and a pair of scissors to every single blade. The more Bon Bon looked, the more bizarre order she saw - fences were washed clean, other ponies stepping out of their homes looked fresh out of some spa treatment, and even the end of a particularly low-hanging cloud had been given perfectly square corners. The effects didn’t extend all the way down the street - it looked like they’d only affected a circular cut of Ponyville, one that Bon Bon and Lyra had only barely been inside.

A high, frantic trill sounded from above, Bon Bon’s ears pricking up in response. A pigeon was flying toward her from the center of the circle, about as fast as she’d ever seen a pigeon fly...

“Wait,” Lyra asked, her eyes widening. “Is that... Nikki?”

“Lapis,” Bon Bon muttered.

They arrived at Lapis’ workshop soon afterward, Bon Bon barely pausing to register the missing doorknob before she spun and kicked the door open.

“Lapis!” Lyra shouted. “Hey! You okay? Nikki came and got us, where are you?”

Bon Bon didn’t bother with words, brushing past Lyra and heading down the hallway that led to Lapis’ bedroom - but Nikki, the pigeon, got in her way, touching down on the hallway and shaking her head *no*.

“We don’t have time for this, Nikki,” Bon Bon said. “Where is he?”

Nikki rolled her eyes, and Bon Bon had to resist the urge to whack the pigeon with her tail as she flew back into the front of Lapis’ house - then, she flew to the door behind the counter, and tugged at the handle.

“In here?” Lyra asked, opening the door to reveal a supply closet. Nikki flew inside at once, out of Bon Bon’s sight, and Lyra cocked her head as the sound of Nikki’s wings flapping didn’t stop. “...Nikki, what do you need an axe for?”

Frowning, Bon Bon trotted into the closet, and found Nikki frantically tugging at a fire-pony’s axe hung on a tool rack - the axe, however, was refusing to budge. Bon Bon huffed, then raised a hoof to lift the axe -

And it stayed put. Bon Bon frowned, then checked the back of the axe, and found it was affixed to a cylinder on the tool rack. “What in Celestia’s name...?”

The sound of wings flapping grabbed Bon Bon’s attention, and she looked back to see Nikki tugging at the doorknob of the closet door, trying to pull it shut. Lyra cocked her head, confused - then, frowning, she shut the door,

her horn bursting into orange light as the door blocked all light from the window.

Nikki flew back to the axe again and tried to flap her wings, but could only manage a few feeble flutters. Bon Bon grimaced, gingerly scooping up the bird with a hoof and dumping her on Lyra's back, then reached out and tried to lift the axe again. This time, it moved - the cylinder turned, and then the wall that the tool-rack was affixed to swung outward like a door, revealing a narrow, steep staircase.

"Huh," Lyra breathed, from just behind Bon Bon. "Secret basement. Neat."

"Quiet," Bon Bon muttered. Something about this place was giving her a bad feeling, and it wasn't just how silent the building was.

Slowly, cautiously, she descended the basement stairs, entering a small, open room that looked at first glance like a hurricane had gone through a smith-pony's workshop. There were hammers and tongs scattered everywhere, scraps of paper and metal tracing smoothly-curving lines from the walls of the room to the middle. And in the center of it all was Lapis Print, lying unmoving on his side. His eyes and mouth were shut, and his mane and tail were spread haphazardly across the floor - *he didn't lie down, he collapsed.*

"Lapis!" Lyra said, and she stepped past Bon Bon to check on him. "Hey, wakey-wakey! Naptime's over, c'mon, up and at 'em!"

Bon Bon saw that he was breathing, and heaved a quick sigh of relief. "He's unconscious, Lyra, not just asleep."

"Unconscious?" Lyra asked, turning to stare briefly at Bon Bon. "But why would he..." She looked down, and seemed to notice the spirals of scrap for the first time. "Oh. Whoa. So, I might've figured out why he's unconscious."

"Not the time for jokes, Lyra," Bon Bon muttered, stepping forward and slinging the other unicorn across her back. Oof. He's heavier than he looks. "We've got to get him to a hospital, stat."

“I’m not joking,” Lyra said, her ears half-flicking back in annoyance. “... But yeah, it can wait. Stay put, I’ll get the door.”

It was almost as hard as lugging a piano upstairs. Lapis was a lot lighter than a piano, but he was also a lot less rigid - which was a good thing, but still inconvenient. Then there was the issue of getting him out of the closet. Bon Bon did her best not to let Lapis knock his head into anything, but there was a close call involving a pry-bar.

Still, eventually, Bon Bon managed to step into the main shop, and hurried out the door and into the main street-

“Lyra, Bon Bon? -Oh, goodness! Is that Lapis?”

“Yeah,” Bon Bon replied, glancing over to see who’d spoken - to her surprise, it was Mayor Mare, who was now looking between Lapis and the eerily-neat streets around his house. “-I mean, ma’am yes ma’am. He’s alive, but unconscious.”

“Oh dear,” Mayor Mare said, trotting over. “Oh, dear oh dear. That’s the third repair-pony we’ve lost in three years, at this rate the whole town will be-!”

“He’s fine, ma’am,” Bon Bon said, rolling her eyes. “Thanks for your concern. But we still need to get him to a hospital.”

“A hospital?” Mayor Mare asked, suddenly snapped out of her thoughts. “...Wait, of course! What’s the matter with him?”

“I don’t know, I’m not a doctor-pony... but my best guess is some kind of magical exhaustion,” Bon Bon said, looking again at their tidied surroundings. “I get the feeling Lapis here might be responsible for that last blast of magic.”

“Not just any magical exhaustion,” Lyra said, grimacing. “I... might be wrong, but something about all this feels like a Harmonic Cascade.”

“A *what?*” Bon Bon and the mayor asked simultaneously.

Lyra groaned. “Look, it’s a long explanation, and I only really remember half of it. Bon Bon, I’ll tell you on the way there, but Mayor Mare, you’ll have to ask somepony who knows their magic better than I do.”

“Oh. Yes, I suppose so,” Mayor Mare replied. “I’m sure Twilight will know the answer.”

“Uh, yeah,” Lyra said, hesitating. “Twilight.”

Bon Bon cocked an eyebrow at her friend. *Don’t do it, Lyra. Be strong,* she thought.

“So, um, I’ve got a favor to ask,” Lyra said, awkwardly pawing at the ground with a hoof. “And it’s *kind of* a weird one. Could I bother you to maybe, possibly, not tell Twilight about who Lapis is?”

Darn it, Lyra. We don’t have time for this, hurry up!

Mayor Mare blinked, cocking her head. “What? Whatever for?”

“So, the thing is,” Lyra said, tucking her ears back, “he’s not exactly a party pony, and him and Twilight and Pinkie have kind of gotten off on the wrong hoof anyway. And for some reason, he’s decided that the best thing to do is to just... avoid them. Completely. And look, I get it’s weird, but he’s made it *really* clear that this is how he wants to go about things, and I just...” She sighed. “I don’t know, I feel like letting them figure out who did this while he’s unconscious would be... letting him down, I guess? Does that make any sense?”

“Lyra, come *on!*” Bon Bon huffed. “Some injuries have a time limit, you know!”

“...I suppose I understand,” Mayor Mare said. “It’s just...”

“It’s a lot, yeah,” Lyra agreed. “I’d take it up with him after he wakes up, maybe? But for now, could you please...?”

From atop Lyra's back, Nikki shot Mayor Mare what looked like a surprisingly good pair of puppy-dog eyes. Mayor Mare resisted for a second, then sighed, her ears flopping back. "...Oh, alright."

Lyra smiled. "Thank you, Ms. Mayor!" She turned, then hurried back down the road next to Bon Bon. "Okay, so, about what happened to Lapis. I took this class *forever* ago, and I've forgotten about half of it, but basically..."

Bon Bon listened, but only halfway. Between the discovery of Lapis' secret basement, and his apparent ability to cast invisibility spells, she was beginning to come up with some questions of her own for when Lapis woke up.

"...Ow," he muttered. "Oh, everything hurts."

Well, mostly my head, but everything else too, yeah.

Grimacing, he reached for the side of his bed, trying to grasp for a glass of water, a bottle of Advil, anything, but for some reason he couldn't move his fingers. He frowned, then raised his hand up to his face and cracked his eyes open.

He regretted his decision almost at once. The light was blindingly bright, piercing his retinas with all the coarse precision of a rusty needle. He groaned, squinting through the pain until his vision cleared, and then inspected his hand -

Where his hand should've been, there was a cream-colored, cork-shaped hoof. And for a second, he felt like screaming.

Then something in his head clicked, and his memories came flooding back like a weight, his pulse surging as his adrenaline kicked in a few seconds too late. *Oh, yeah. That happened. Right.*

Okay, before anything else happens, back in character, quick.

My name is Lapis Print. I was raised by griffons, and I work as a repair-pony in Ponyville. I am, and always have been, a unicorn from Equestria. I

*am not, and never have been, an alien monkey from another dimension.
Act natural. And... go.*

Slowly, Lapis opened his eyes the rest of the way, taking in his surroundings with a wary eye. He was in a hospital, lying on his back on a narrow mattress beneath a filmy, pure-white sheet. It felt like he was wearing a hospital gown, too, and there was something rhythmically beeping off to the side of his head.

A set of slow, heavy hoofsteps approached the door, and Lapis turned his head to look, expecting some pony wearing a nurse's uniform (*for absolutely no good reason, besides thematic consistency.*) He was surprised to instead see a black-and-white-striped hoof bearing a set of golden bracelets cross the threshold, followed shortly afterward by the similarly-patterned, mohawked head of a zebra. She blinked at him with familiar aquamarine eyes, then smiled.

"Well, if it isn't my barrel-masked friend," she said. "How are you, now that your rest is at an end?"

...Zecora? Lapis thought. I think that's her name. "Headache," he said. "But still alive and kicking. How come you're here?"

Zecora smiled again. "Ponyville's doctors and I both cure many things. I am here in their stead thanks to Lyra Heartstrings." Her face grew grim. "Your condition, I fear, gave her quite a fright. She seemed quite sure help had to be me, or Twilight."

...And that's one more pony for the Hide-Me Conspiracy. Lapis grimaced, then pushed himself a little further upright. "Right. Uh, thanks. Head's still a little foggy. You know what happened to me?"

Zecora nodded. "Worry you had denied, and buried turmoil, and deep in your heart it began to boil. Far too much strain, you had put on yourself. When for magic you reached, empty you found your shelf. In fear and in panic, you called upon more, and tapped into a deeper, wilder store. But too much, you have found, such is to control - and so to the floor, you unconscious lolled."

“Oh.” Lapis sighed. “Great. How long was I out for?”

“As much as you need, you will rest ‘til you get,” Zecora said, fixing him with a gentle, but firm stare. “The length of your sleep was almost a week yet.”

“A week?!” Lapis yelped, sitting bolt upright. *Holy shit. Holy shit, the entire town was destroyed, and I've been unconscious for a week? Dear God, the backlog on my board must be insane!*

“Fully restored, you have yet to be,” Zecora admonished, and Lapis snapped out of his panic just in time for the zebra to start staring him back down onto his blankets. “You will not work ‘til you’ve finished your recovery.”

“...I appreciate your concern,” Lapis began.

Zecora cut him off with a wave of her hoof, lifting a teapot into view from the end of his bed. “No ‘buts’ there will be, until restored you are true.” She poured out two cups of tea, taking one in a hoof and pushing the other to Lapis’ side. “Let us drink, and pass time. Tell me, Lapis, who are you?”

Lapis hesitated a moment, then reached out with his magic. He winced as his horn twinged - an awful kind of piercing pain, like poking a cavity in a tooth - but nonetheless managed to lift the teacup to his lips.

Zecora’s question hadn’t really been too deep, but for some reason, Lapis found himself giving it more thought than he’d expected. He thought about the pyramid of mana-siphons he’s set up that morning - or, well, a week ago, now. He remembered how he’d been nearly caught by Pinkie and Twilight before, and had only escaped them thanks to a combination of his own mask and the book that the Mayor had let him have from Trixie’s wagon, and how before that he’d forgotten his mask, and only escaped Pinkie thanks to Bon Bon’s choice of brunch. He thought about fighting off the bug-things, and how he’d been fighting a losing battle until Nikki and the other pigeons had pitched in.

Lyra and Bon Bon must’ve found me in the basement, Lapis realized...

...and I'd probably be dead if they hadn't.

He took a careful sip of the tea, and found it was delicious - some kind of berry, with a vanilla-like undertone that reminded him of the way new paper smelled.

"I guess," he said, "I'm somepony who's been trying too much to rely on themselves."

Zecora smiled.

Author's Notes:

Patch Notes:

- None for this one, because I'm uploading at 1:30 AM my time, and I'm tired.

Hey, here we are! Let me tell you, I've been looking forward to writing this one for about half a month now. The last chapters that I had this clear a vision for were the opening two, and seeing as those are the ones that probably got a lot of you hooked, you can decide for yourself whether there's been a change in quality.

So, first things first: something else you might've noticed is that, as of this episode's connection to *Swarm of the Century* without discussion of most of the episodes that happen in between then and *Bridle Gossip*, the timeline with which I'm working has now officially deviated from both of those provided earlier in the comments section by the generous tkepner (who started writing a story like this one first, by the by - it's a Harry Potter crossover, so if you're a Potterhead, go and check it out!) I'll go ahead and admit it - this split from the timeline, both with *Swarm of the Century* and with reference to "The Bunny Incident" of *Applebuck Season*, is a mistake on my part. I've been working according to the order of episodes so far, and thought that would be good enough to continue working with - however, seeing *Winter Wrap-Up* appear on that list before *Fall-Weather Friends* basically disabused

me of that notion, barring an (in-universe) six-month-long break between episodes that would give Twilight and Pinkie altogether too much time to hunt down Graystreak McNeatfreak. As such, from here on out, I should basically be following the timeline found on tobyandmavisforever's DeviantArt page, the link to which looks like this minus spaces:

[<https://www.deviantart.com/tobyandmavisforever/art/Friendship-Is-Magic-Timeline-766636433>]

Some of you might look at this timeline and think, "Huh. That puts Feeling Pinkie Keen, the episode in which Twilight conducts research on Pinkie Pie's Pinkie Sense, as something that will probably happen next." That's because you're right.

Anyway, aside from the deviations I mentioned above, I am still trying to stay consistent with canon. The most niche examples of this I can think of, besides obvious plot points being obvious, are the missing instruments that Lyra mentions to Lapis: both were taken by Pinkie, to help solve the Parasprite problem. On top of that, Lyra and Bon Bon were, as far as I could tell, outside of Sugarcube Corner with their slices of cake when the Parasprites started falling from the sky - at least, I think that's Sugarcube Corner in the background, based on the gingerbread-house-ish decor and the half-barrel cupcake stand.

Next things next - props to Vaalintine, who's been in the comments section putting together a fair few legitimate, not-insane-seeming reasons for Lapis to avoid Pinkie Pie! I basically stole from his work for Lapis' explanations to Lyra and Bon Bon, though I can't guarantee even that explanation will stick for too long without continuing to develop.

And finally: yes, I did hint at Celestia showing up in this episode a few different times. And yes, she never did. That's because she was intercepted outside of Ponyville by a parade, and shortly had to go deal with an infestation of some sort in Philadelphia. Still, you have to wonder - what would she have seen, as she flew over Ponyville? How bad is Lapis' timing, and what might that kind of magical shockwave have reminded her of?

'Till the next one!

Lucky Number: Multi-Faceted Approaches

“...And here’s your change,” Bon Bon said, sliding a small stack of coins onto the counter.

Her customer, a lemon-yellow pegasus stallion wearing an equally-yellow hard hat, grinned as he slid the stack into his saddlebag, along with the bag of candies he’d just bought. “Thank you kindly.”

“Have a nice day,” Bon Bon said, as the stallion turned and left the shop, taking to the air a few seconds later.

Lyra, who was sitting next to Bon Bon behind the counter with a notebook, waited until the door had jingled shut to speak. “...*Hard lemon drops?*”

“Yes, he bought hard lemon drops.” Bon Bon said. “They’re great. You can carry around a bunch at once, they last a while, and they make your breath smell nice. What’s strange about that?”

“Bon Bon,” Lyra said, turning to reveal a playful grin, “if that stallion had been any brighter yellow, Princess Celestia would be moving him instead of the sun. He comes in here and buys the yellowest candy we have, and you don’t even bat an eye?”

“I sure don’t,” Bon Bon replied. “Our business is selling candy, not making jokes about it.”

“See, that’s only because you haven’t tried candy jokes yet,” Lyra said, moving to stand behind Bon Bon and sweeping her own hoof through the air. “Picture it: there you are, on the stage...”

“-I’d rather not.”

“...with dozens of ponies watching you. You walk to the edge of the stage, open your mouth, and wait for just a second - ‘I had a lollipop joke,’ you say, ‘but I’ve forgotten it.’”

“Please don’t.”

Lyra grinned. “The crowd leans forward. You smile, and say, ‘I’ve almost got it... it’s on the tip of my tongue.’”

Bon Bon groaned, but she felt a smirk spreading across her face. “Sweet Celestia, Lyra. That was *terrible*.”

“I do my best,” Lyra replied, brushing her hoof off on her coat. “Oh, hey, that reminds me. Have you gone by Town Hall lately? There’s a hole in the walls big enough, you can see the stage through it!”

Bon Bon looked up sharply. “The Parasprites got that far?” She’d learned what the bugs were called only two days before; the Mayor - accompanied by Twilight and her friends - had held a speech not long after Pinkie had led the Parasprites back into the Everfree.

“Yeah, there were a couple other buildings that got hit over there, but the Town Hall got the worst of it,” Lyra said, flipping open her notebook as she took a seat. “I was looking at it, though, and I was thinking - it really helps open up the building!”

Bon Bon snorted. “Well, I guess that’s true.”

“Hey, don’t take that tone with me,” Lyra said, mock-offended. “Listen, I know the Town Hall is already all open and all, with the arching ceilings and the windows and pillars and things, but don’t you think it’s a little... I don’t know, stuffy?”

“It can get a little gloomy when there’s no banners in there,” Bon Bon conceded. *Especially in the winter, once the Hearth’s Warming Eve decorations come down.*

“Exactly!” Lyra said, smiling over the top of her notebook. “But with that hole there, and all the natural light coming in, it feels like... I don’t know, like a *real* public area, where ponies can hang out. Like a... a picnic shelter or something, instead of just some wannabe-fancy office building in Manehattan.”

Bon Bon looked over at Lyra, half-grinning. “I think you might be forgetting that Town Hall is a government building.”

“So?” Lyra shrugged. “It’s the government building where all the fun stuff happens. I just think it should feel like it, that’s all.”

“Alright, I get it,” Bon Bon said. “Who knows? Maybe I’ll mention it to the Mayor next time I see her. I have to head in a few days from now, make sure some paperwork gets filed. ...Come to think of it,” she added, glancing back into the kitchen, “I’m about out of confectioner’s sugar, too, and there’s a few other things I could stock up on. Sorry to drop this on you, Lyra, but could you watch the shop while I’m out?”

“No problem!” Lyra said, grinning. “Oh! Hey, what do I do if somepony orders in bulk?”

“They won’t,” Bon Bon said, standing up and stretching her back.

“Okay, but what if they do?” Lyra asked, looking over top of her notebook.

“Then say you’ll check with the head cook, write down what they want, and tell me when I get back,” Bon Bon said, trotting over to the door. “Oh, and if Big Mac comes by, tell him I delivered that cider barrel like he asked me to!”

Lyra cocked her head. “Wait, what cider barrel?”

“...The ‘get-well-soon’ cider, remember?” Bon Bon said, pausing with the door open. “For Lapis?”

“Oh,” Lyra said, her ears half-flopping back. “Yeah. That, right. Don’t worry, I’ll tell him!” she added, plastering a smile back onto her face.

“...He’ll be fine, Lyra,” Bon Bon said. “Remember what Zecora said? We’ll see him up and about any time now.”

“Well, yeah,” Lyra said, grimacing. “It’s just... well, my aunt had a Cascade once, and she was nervous about using her magic again for weeks. I just... I hope he’s okay, that’s all.”

“Me, too,” Bon Bon said, sighing. “We’ll just have to wait and see.”

Lyra sighed, then smiled again. “Let me know if you see him, okay?”

“Of course,” Bon Bon replied. “Back in a bit, Ly-Ly.”

“See you, BB,” Lyra replied, as Bon Bon stepped outside.

Bon Bon got about ten steps in the direction of the market streets, then stopped.

He’s just a private pony, she thought. He’s got perfectly good reasons. It would be uncalled-for to invade his privacy, especially while he’s unconscious. I can wait until he’s awake, and then ask him.

She’d been thinking the same things every time that Lapis was brought up. But, no matter how many times she’d thought them, there were too many strange things about the second-newest-pony in Ponyville to ignore.

His dogged refusal to meet, talk to, or even go *near* Pinkie Pie or her friends, for one thing. Lapis had provided almost half-a-dozen different reasons for his behavior, and a few of them were valid, but the others - especially the earlier ones - rang more and more hollow the more that Bon Bon considered them.

Then there were the odd gaps in his magical ability. From talking with Lyra, Bon Bon knew that Mend-All spells were especially nasty for most unicorns - not too taxing, if done right, but with a long, complex, and messy incantation that carried severe consequences if mis-recited. Lapis could cast them in an instant, multiple times a day, with no apparent ill effects beside

fatigue - and yet, it had taken him *weeks* of living in Ponyville to learn any other spells, even a Hornlight. Not to mention that the next spell he'd learned was invisibility - why in the world would a repair-pony need to know an invisibility spell? It just didn't add up.

Not to mention the secret basement. The smith's workshop, Bon Bon could almost overlook. But not quite. There was too much scrap paper and metal down there for Lapis to have been using it only for making repairs, and besides, why had he been down there just after the Parasprite attack?

But the final straw, the one that niggled at her now, was the oldest of the bunch. When Lapis had first arrived in Ponyville, he'd stumbled over a few strange words - 'everypony,' 'hooves,' and a few others. Lapis had revealed he was raised by griffons, and Bon Bon had assumed that was the explanation. Bon Bon knew for a *fact* that the griffon dialect of Equish used 'everygriffon' and 'claws' in place of their Standard-Equish equivalents, and - as Lapis' friend - she strongly doubted anything else could be the case.

But the pony who stood on the street, doubting her friend and her judgement, had two names. And Agent Sweetie Drops of S.M.I.L.E., the Secret Monster Intelligence League of Equestria, knew full well that there was another possible explanation. One that was beginning to make a disturbing amount of sense. And so, slowly, she turned down an alley, then set off at a brisk, businesslike trot toward the suspect's place of residence.

...Sorry, Lapis.

But I can't take the risk.

Applejack was halfway through nailing the doorway-joist for the new apple-cellar into place when the far end splintered and fell from the wall, the damaged end hitting the red brick of the floor first with a crackling bounce.

She didn't swear; she was proud of that much. The Pink Lady orchards were right next to where the rest of the barn would be, and Pink Ladies

were far too prim and proper to tolerate foul language - and far too sweet to risk souring their mood. But Applejack had to admit, as she looked at the jagged nub of torn wood that once had been a joist, that she was angry enough to swear at whatever carpenter-pony hadn't thought to give that board a close enough inspection.

So, instead of swearing, Applejack huffed and clambered down the stepladder, tucking her ears back and craning her head down to inspect the damage. And sure enough, it was bad - the board might yet be useful for table legs, if she could find a sharp enough saw to rip-cut the broken portion off the rest of the beam, but she wasn't making furniture yet. She was making a doorframe, and now, she'd need to find another board for it.

"Horseapples," Applejack muttered, quietly enough that the Pink Ladies wouldn't hear. Lumber wasn't cheap in Ponyville - most of it came from the only group of ponies foolhardy enough to harvest it from the Everfree, and foolhardy as they were, they were too clever to do it for cheap. That meant she'd have to break down some spare apple-cart for lumber, and that was an hour-long project she'd rather not undertake just then. *Consarn it, when's Twilight gettin' here?*

Applejack heard a familiar set of hoofsteps coming up behind her, and looked back to see Big Mac walking up to inspect the fence. At a glance, his face looked about as neutral as usual, but she knew her brother well enough to read that tightness around his eyes.

"Any ideas?" she asked, gesturing to the piece of scrap wood. "Ah was gonna leave it till Twilight shows up, and see if she can do something about it."

Big Mac thought for a moment. Then - "Nope."

"...Nothin'? Nothin' at all?"

Big Mac shook his head. "Ah can't splint it together mahself - that'd take too long, and I gotta finish truckin' those support beams up the hill anyhow," he explained, waving a hoof toward the bottom of the hill, where

a large pile of large, sturdy wooden posts waited on a sled. “And Ah would call in the town’s repair-pony, but he’s not feelin’ too well just now.”

Applejack hesitated, her ears pricking up at the last few words. “Whoa, hold on now. Ponyville has a town repair-pony? Since when?”

“He moved in three days ‘fore Princess Luna returned,” Big Mac said, cocking an eyebrow. “Ah thought Ah’d told you about him already. He stopped that big pot o’ oatmeal from fallin’ on me while you were out in the Everfree, remember?”

The image of the enormous, town-sized pewter cooking pot that sat in a storeroom of Town Hall suddenly flashed through Applejack’s head, and her eyes went wide as she turned to face her brother. “When *what-now* almost fell on you?!?”

Big Mac cocked an eyebrow, and after a moment’s pause, Applejack looked down at the ground. “Well, shoot. Ah guess Ah don’t remember, do Ah?”

“Nope.” Big Mac shrugged. “Although, it *was* plumb in the middle of apple-buckin’ season, so Ah s’pose you weren’t at your best when Ah mentioned it.”

“Huh,” Applejack said, her ears flopping back. “Darn it. Well, Ah’m sorry, Big Mac. Ah shoulda been payin’ better attention.”

“No harm done.”

Applejack smiled apologetically, then cleared her throat. “So, you said this feller helped you out back then? Y’all will have to tell me the details on that pot o’ oats, by the way. If Ah hear you almost got yerself hurt pullin’ some silly stunt again...”

“Anyway,” Big Mac said, and Applejack quickly hid her grin. *Gettin’ Big Mac to talk ain’t hard, you just have to know how to go about doin’ it.* “Like Ah said, he’s indisposed. From what Ah heard, which ain’t much, them para-sprites got to somethin’ pretty important of his an’ the shock of it did a

number on him. He's been out cold in Ponyville General for 'bout a week now."

"Gol-ly," Applejack muttered. "An' he's the only repair-pony in town? He'll be a busy feller when he wakes up, that's for darn sure."

"E-yup. Certainly seemed that way earlier that day," Big Mac added, bending down to pick up the former beam.

"Hold on again," Applejack said, her ears tucking back again as she raised a hoof to her forehead, Big Mac pausing as he put the scrap board on his back. "And just what do y'all mean by that?"

"Ah mean Ah'd just had him over here, the mornin' before that mess with the para-sprites," Big Mac said, cocking his eyebrow again. "...Though this time, Ah don't think Ah've mentioned to you 'fore now."

"An' you didn't keep him over fer dinner?" Applejack asked, sighing as she started down the hill toward the sled of beams. "Big Mac, that's no way to show hospitality to a pony what saved your hide! What would Granny Smith say?"

"Not much, seein' as he'd just told the both of us the old house had rotten timbers," Big Mac said as he trotted down alongside her, and Applejack winced. They both knew all about Granny Smith's stubborn streak. "'Sides, he already had an appointment to keep. Somethin' about a concert, if Ah recall."

"So that's how you knew the house wasn't safe," Applejack muttered.
"Huh."

"Fer what it's worth," Big Mac added, yoking himself to the sled of beams, "Ah was sure to get him the better of the two test-barrels of cider from this year's batch. He wouldn't accept any payment for the consultation, so Ah felt it was about right, both for compensation an' for a get-well gift."

"The tart one, or the spicy one?"

“The tart one. It’s still summer yet, an’ I figured it’d do as well as lemonade.”

“Huh. Well, Ah s’pose that’s all right then,” Applejack said, and they both grunted as they began to haul the sled up the hill. “Still, the next time he’s over here, he’s stayin’ for supper, busy or not.”

Big Mac rolled his eyes, but grinned. “E-yup.” And in very little time at all, they’d pulled the entire sled up the hill.

The archives of Town Hall were the epitome of the word “stuffy.” They were an old, slate-brick room buried below the rest of the building, at the bottom of a staircase that was almost apologetically hidden away behind the stage. There wasn’t a single ray of natural light in the whole of the long, narrow space, which was almost more like a hallway than a room. Most of the archives were toward the middle of the room, and were made up of two rows of four shelves crammed full to bursting with bins of paperwork, loosely organized by date. The older papers were bound and kept on shelves against the walls, while the very oldest surviving were stored inside of separate folders inside of filing cabinets, at the very back of the room.

Mayor Mare absently hummed to herself as she sorted through one of these filing cabinets. She wasn’t sure what the song was, but somewhere, some crowd of ponies was surely singing it. That was how Heartsongs usually worked, after all.

Unfortunately, as much as she’d love to be in the middle of some musical number, there were some sheets of paper she was looking for. Some records, to be exact, as there was something troubling her about-

“Excuse me, Ms. Mayor?”

“Oh!” Mayor Mare yelped, turning to face the speaking pony. “Goodness, Twilight. You’re quiet on your hooves!”

“Oh my! I’m so sorry, I seem to have a knack for startling ponies lately,” Twilight said, smiling and half-tipping her ears back. “I just wanted to deliver that secondary damage report you asked me to compile. Is now a bad time?”

Mayor Mare shook her head. “No, not at all, Twilight. Go right ahead.”

“Right,” Twilight said, clearing her throat. “Here goes. ‘The magical event that resulted from the Parasprite Incident had a diameter of roughly 100 hooves, centered on Nutmeg Way and extending both vertically and horizontally. Within this hemisphere: all crooked teeth were forcibly straightened, all clouds were made into cubic formations of perfectly aligned axes, all lawns were mowed perfectly level, all fallen acorns’ positions were adjusted...’”

Mayor Mare cocked her head. “Acorns? Those didn’t look affected to me...”

“Not to me at first, either,” Twilight said, smiling excitedly. “However, once I made a diagram of their locations relative to each other, I was able to determine that all their positions were consistent with intersections of the lines of a 1-inch square grid!”

“... You *diagrammed*... the *acorns*? ”

“Mm-hm!” Twilight nodded, then continued reading through her report. “Most homes were re-organized, the Carousel Boutique being exempt. All rust, dust, and grime were forcibly expelled from their surfaces to distances as great as 150 to 200 hooves away, and all coat hair, mane hair, and feathers became as clean and tidy as if they were freshly washed, combed, and straightened, regardless of previous curliness, with the exception of flight feathers on pegasi. These effects persist, so far as I can tell, until all affected material has been shed and replaced.””

Mayor Mare nodded along with the report, her bewilderment only increasing with every sentence, until Twilight reached her conclusion. “Based on this combination of effects, I believe the magical incident

responsible to be a Magic Cascade of Harmonic frequencies, likely induced in a unicorn by the stress of the Parasprite invasion of Ponyville.””

“A... magic cascade,” Mayor Mare said, mulling the phrase over in her head. “Like a waterfall, or...”

Twilight blinked, then her ears flopped back. “Oh. You don’t know what that is. Right, sorry.”

“No, it’s quite alright, Twilight,” Mayor Mare said, waving a hoof. “I’m glad to hear I picked the pony with the right information for the job. Could I trouble you to share the broad strokes?”

Twilight smiled, her ears rising a little. “I’d be delighted. Just give me a moment to compose my thoughts...” She shut her eyes, and Mayor Mare briefly glanced back into the filing cabinet. ...*Still no luck. Well.*

“Alright, I think I’ve got it,” Twilight said, Mayor Mare turning her head to look. “So, when a unicorn casts a spell, there are certain emotions that can influence the results.” Twilight’s horn flickered as she spoke, and after a few seconds, a small, glowing orb appeared next to her head, moving in slow, controlled circles around her horn.

“Positive emotions, like joy, contentment, love, and so on, tend to make the results more potent, but still in line with what the spell is *supposed* to accomplish.” Then, Twilight shut her eyes for a second, a small, soft smile growing on her face, and the orb sped up in its orbit, its glow growing slightly brighter. “...For example, as you just saw, when I thought about some happy memories, this modified Hornlight spell was able to move faster and produce more light.”

“Other emotions, though, tend to have... varied results,” Twilight continued, and her brow furrowed for a moment - then, the magical ball flared with sudden light, its movement slowing to a crawl as its orbit suddenly grew wobbly. “...Frustration, for example, will increase power at a massive cost to stability, and an equally massive increase in difficulty.”

Twilight dismissed the spell, exhaling a quick breath, then opened her eyes and resumed speaking. “There are other emotional influences, of course. Boredom aids creativity, bewilderment is exactly as unhelpful as you think it is, but for this discussion, we need to worry about a few of the *really* tricky ones: worry, despair, and panic.”

Mayor Mare swallowed. “I take it you won’t be demonstrating their effects?”

“Not intentionally, and hopefully not anytime soon,” Twilight said, grimacing. “Any one on their own is bad enough, but when you end up mixing serious personal worry and despair together, then trying to shove them down and ignore them, you end up making a big, bottled-up cocktail of freak-out. And that cocktail, inside a unicorn, is a recipe for disaster.

“Take... well, me, for example. When I was a filly, I was *really* focused on my first magic exam,” Twilight continued. “I studied for it for days, and my worst fear, the entire time, was that I would fail. And once I got started on that exam, the worry just wouldn’t stop. I could barely cast any magic at all, and what I did cast was draining my reserves extra-quickly. So, naturally, I... failed.

Twilight sighed, her ears flopping back. “And that’s when the despair hit. Even back then, I knew trying to cast a spell on purpose right then would be a bad plan, so I tried to see myself out with some dignity - but then, well, some big *boom* went off, and it startled me.

“You remember how I described the worry and despair as ‘bottled up?’ Well, low magic reserves combined with a quick jolt of panic shakes that bottle. And, if it’s a hard enough shake, all that backed-up emotion will pop the cork and... well, kinda explode out.”

Mayor Mare nodded. “And that, combined with magic, is what happened to cause what you just described?”

“...Part of it,” Twilight said, shutting her eyes as her horn began to glow. “All the emotion meets whatever magic is left, and the entire mix gushes

out, draining the unicorn of their strength and *usually* making them pass out: a Cascade. But, there's another half to the equation."

Twilight took a slow, deep breath, and slowly, an amethyst glow began to wrap around every box, every bound volume, every piece of paper in the room. Mayor Mare looked around, confused - then her jaw dropped as Twilight opened her eyes and began to straighten out the room. Crooked sheets of paper were re-aligned in their stacks, mis-filed documents floated briefly before Twilight's face before they were put in their places, and books that were out of order made their way to their proper locations.

"This might surprise you," Twilight said, her voice strained but her smile clear, "but I'm normally a *very* well-organized pony."

"If I'm... left to shape all my own circumstances, I end up trying to create a perfectly-ordered environment. Everything in its place, everything according to schedule, with no misfilings, no interruptions. Perfect harmony." The last sheet of paper snapped itself into alignment with the others in its stack, and Twilight released a tired breath. "Whoo. Haven't done that in a while. Guess I'm a little rusty!"

"I might... be able to compensate you, should you want to change that," Mayor Mare croaked, looking around at the newly-sorted basement.

"We'll discuss my going rates later." Twilight cleared her throat. "At any rate. The thing is, when I'm left to create that environment for a really, *really* long time, like when I was studying for that test, I start to find it... stifling. I want a way out, a break, some freedom to do something that isn't scheduled, to get off the rails that might well lead to failure. I want a little bit of chaos." And as she spoke, in one sheaf of paperwork on the shelf, a single piece of paperwork rotated itself by a few degrees - not much, but just enough for the corners to stick out.

Twilight glanced at the sheaf of papers and cocked an eyebrow, then re-aligned the loose paper with a sharp tug. "Not that much."

She cleared her throat, then continued. “Magic tries to fulfill the desires of the unicorn using it. So, when I had a Cascade at my test, it ended up creating some pretty random results. I made the judges float, I turned my parents into potted plants, I grew Spike to the size of a tower... you get it. That is what we’d call a *Discordant Cascade*, magic that is given no instructions but to spice things up a little, and then set loose.

“And the opposite of that... would be what happens if a pony who’s used to leading a varied, chaotic life is finding it to be the bane of their existence. A pony who can usually improvise their way through things, getting forced to improvise for too long, until they feel like everything is spiraling out of control, like they can’t see any kind of order in the world. When their magic gets loose, it knows that the unicorn wants to make some sense of their situation, to feel like everything is under control, in harmony. That everything will be okay. So, it tries its best.

“We call that a *Harmonic Cascade*, and it tends to take harmony to unwelcome extremes, until the specifics and degrees of organization are just as bad as chaos. As far as I can tell, that’s what happened here,” Twilight finished, taking a deep breath. “And that’s pretty much the entire lecture I attended on Cascades. ...Sorry, that got a little personal near the end there. Does it help any?”

“I... think so,” the Mayor said. “Just to be clear, though... these ‘Cascades’ can happen if any sufficiently stressed unicorn loses their composure?”

Twilight shook her head. “Not quite. It’s only really possible for unicorns with repositories of 567 thaums or more... uh, I mean,” she added, watching the Mayor’s brow contort in confusion, “only unicorns with a certain degree of magical power. About 16 percent, or... four of every twenty-five unicorns are at risk, because if you have a lower power level than that, then you can’t have a low tank while having enough mana to support the waves of a Cascade.”

Mayor Mare nodded. “I see. And why hasn’t this happened in Ponyville before?”

“Well, it’s pretty rare for most ponies to build up the emotional mix that produces a Cascade,” Twilight said. “I’ve read that it’s a lot more common for unicorns that travel abroad, especially to places that aren’t as... stable as central Equestria. But still, you usually need weeks of serious personal worry to build up that kind of emotional backlog, and in Ponyville, most of my problems don’t last longer than a few days. ...Except for current events, anyway.” Twilight added.

“Yes. Helping Applejack reconstruct her barn, was it?” Mayor Mare asked. “Unless you have anything else to add...”

“Oh, no. Not unless you had anything else to ask, anyway,” Twilight said, turning to the door.”

“No, I think I have a much clearer grasp of Cascades now, thank you, Twilight.”

“Alright then!” Twilight headed out the door. “See you next festival!”

“Hopefully!” Mayor Mare called back. Then she turned back toward the filing cabinet, shaking her head in amusement. *I suppose there has to be some trade-off for magic. Unicorns get it, and the rest of us ponies get to have mental breakdowns in the privacy of our own homes without making it anypony else’s problem.*

Still, as magical disasters go... well, I’ve certainly seen worse. Mayor Mare pulled open the filing cabinet with a hoof, relishing the fresh perfection of its organization - and stopped, confused. The documents she was searching for, which by all rights should have dated back nearly to the founding of Ponyville, were simply missing.

Mayor Mare had made the discovery during re-filing day, about a week before. She’d doubted it, however, and that’s what had driven her into the archives today - checking not just recent documentation, but even the very oldest files in Town Hall. And both her checks and her double-checks had confirmed her suspicions:

The Red Repair Shop, home to one Lapis Print, did not have blueprints on file with the Town Hall. Nor did it have records of *any* of the previous owners - where those files should have been, there instead sat narrow, deep slivers of empty space in the shelves and drawers, as clean and precise as cuts in a pinata.

Agent Sweetie Drops began to sweep Lapis Print's house, and immediately suppressed the tingle of dread that began to rise in her gut.

The place had barely been touched since Lapis was inside it last. There were still pigeon feathers on the floor, from where Sweetie Drops wasn't sure - some shifted in the breeze as she moved through the building, but others remained still, in the grid pattern that Lapis' magic had left it in, along with the half a doorknob that had fallen from the door.

Besides that, though, the building was in eerily good condition. There was no dust or grime on the counters, no motes swirling through the air beside the yellow-tinted window. She felt a twinge of guilt as she spotted the rug that she and Lyra had brought, which was as clean and fluffy as if it were brand-new. The painting of the mustached griffon was there, too - it hung perfectly straight on the wall, smirking at Sweetie Drops without blinking.

Maybe it was just because of the spell's aftermath, or maybe it was because she had some doubts. But somehow, even though Agent Sweetie Drops knew there was nopony inside, this house didn't feel vacant.

The problem was, it didn't necessarily feel like there was anypony inside, either.

Sweetie Drops didn't close the main door behind her as she made her way through the living room, and into the hallway that led to the other rooms of the building. The obsessive organization persisted as she investigated - the cookware in its drawers was all perfectly stacked atop itself, the blankets on the guest bed were stretched taut across the level mattress, and even in Lapis' own bedroom, the pillows were right at the center of the headboard - even though Lapis preferred to sleep off to the right side, if the shallow dip in his mattress was anything to judge by.

But the organization was far from the only thing that unnerved her, as she checked the building's closets, its nooks and crannies and crevices. Every pony she'd ever met, including herself, had amassed more stuff than they knew what to do with over the course of their life. Hay, she still had a box of foals' cookbooks left over from old birthdays, along with a few other boxes of junk that she didn't use enough to take out of the closet.

Lapis didn't have those boxes. He had no mementos or keepsakes, no mess. His home was far from Spurtan, he'd seen to that much with his furniture, but there wasn't enough depth to it. Yes, Lapis had only just moved in, but as Sweetie Drops looked around the building, she began to feel as if she weren't inside of anypony's home at all - only inside a cheap imitation of a home.

She kept her ears pricked up as she approached the closet behind Lapis' counter, the sound of her hoofsteps seeming deafening on the wooden floor. Slowly, carefully, she stepped inside and pulled the door partway shut behind her, then she attempted to open the secret door. Something wooden thunked against itself beneath her hooves, and Sweetie Drops grimaced. *Whatever locking mechanism this is, it's locked down good. No way I'm breaking it without busting up the floorboards, or something else.*

So, with rising unease, she shut the closet door the rest of the way, then pulled the secret door open and descended the stairs into the secret basement.

Even here, Lapis' house found new ways to unnerve her. This was the only room in the building that the Parasprites had gotten into, and Sweetie Drops could see it everywhere she looked - anything they could sink their teeth into, they had, and their crescent-shaped, serrated bite marks were visible on every piece of wreckage on the floor. But only some of that wreckage was scattered, in the places where she and Lyra had trampled through it - the rest was still sitting in those strange spiral patterns that came together at the place where Lapis had collapsed, tracing ever-widening lines to every wall.

Still, a lot of that wreckage had writing on it, or else handles. That made it mess, and that brought Sweetie Drops a little bit of relief - this space, at least, was a home, not just a space somepony lived in. Looking around the room in greater detail brought her greater relief, at least at first - she'd been suspecting this room would show signs of recent construction, and aside from some fresh wear on patches of the room's walls, this place looked as if it had been built alongside the rest of the house.

When Sweetie Drops moved on to the workbench, though, she found cause for concern. There were three books there - one, the most heavily-chewed of the bunch, was mostly blank. There were a few pages near the front that detailed a drawing of some strange contraption, and a few more that looked like... pages copied down from a spellbook, though she wasn't really sure. She cocked an eyebrow at the page labeled *Shape-Shifting*, filing that piece of information away for later.

The next book, bound in blue tape that was painted with yellow stars, was definitely a spellbook. Sweetie Drops recognized the title page - it was a copy of *Magic 4 Dummies*, though a very old and... strangely concealed one. She cocked her eyebrow at the hastily-scribbled, off-center label on the front cover: *The Great and Powerful Trixie's Tome of Untold Magical Secrets*.

The final book... perplexed her. The parasprites had taken a strange approach to eating it, preferring to somehow scrape the words off the pages instead of biting through whatever material the cover was made of. This book, too, was full of odd diagrams, accompanied by half-eaten paragraphs of jargon that she couldn't be bothered to parse.

Bon Bon eventually closed the book, then sat back on her rump with a relieved sigh. What she'd been afraid of finding was written notes on a different subject - other ponies, especially with a focus on their habits, mannerisms, and routines. But, as unsettling as poking through Lapis' house had been, it seemed like her suspicions were unfounded.

And, she thought as she ascended the basement stairs, the shape-shifting spell didn't fit either. They already know how to disguise themselves, they don't need pony knowledge on the subject...

Bon Bon lost her train of thought as she reached the top of the stairs, and saw the hatch that led into Lapis' attic. She hadn't checked there yet - but, now that she saw the hatch, she remembered Lapis saying something about there being a magical charging array up there.

Frowning, she closed the secret door and opened the closet, then stared up at the hatch. *I've never seen a charging array up close before... and besides, I should probably check up there anyway, even though there's probably nothing else there.*

Bon Bon briefly glanced around, making sure nopony was peering in through the windows - then she pulled open the attic hatch, grabbed one of the magic lanterns off the walls, and ascended the ladder into darkness.

The charging array was practically on display in the middle of the room, whirring and clinking away from its brackets against the chimney. Bon Bon stepped over to take a closer look, tracing one especially thick copper rod that connected to the ceiling - and gasped, her eyes shooting wide open as she spotted the place where roof and rod met.

"There you go, little bird," Fluttershy murmured, smiling as she nosed a small plate of birdseed across the end-table. "How's your wing? Feeling better yet?"

"*Some,*" cooed the pigeon on her table, glancing briefly at the birdseed. They were inside her cottage, near the edge of the village and the Everfree Forest. It was sunny outside, but Fluttershy had the curtains drawn - she was taking care of a mole with some broken claws, and she didn't want the sun to get in his eyes, no more than she wanted this pigeon trying to fly on a sprained wing.

Still, the pigeon wanted to fly soon, and Fluttershy didn't blame her - her cottage was cozy, but it wasn't roomy, and it certainly didn't have the space to let a pigeon spread her wings and fly. Rainbow Dash managed to fly when she came to visit, but not without knocking Fluttershy's plants off their shelves. Fluttershy had told the pigeon all about it, but she still half-expected the poor thing to try flying anyway.

“So, are you going to tell me how you hurt your wing?” Fluttershy asked, smiling. “It might help me get you better sooner...”

The pigeon shot her a glare to rival a frustrated Applejack. “*No. Please stop asking.*”

Fluttershy considered forcing the issue, but eventually decided against it. “Well, alright,” she sighed. “If you change your mind, just let me know, Nikki.”

“*I won’t.*” Nikki started pecking at the birdseed, and Fluttershy turned away, humming to herself as she started mixing a batch of medicine for a family of squirrels. Nikki had been brought to her cottage by Lyra, not too long after the Parasprites had attacked. Fluttershy had been doing her best to clean up after the mess, but she wasn’t quite done yet... well, she wasn’t really done at all. Most of her cabinets were still a mess, and half the food was completely gone - but at least Rainbow Dash had sucked all the Parasprites out with her tornado before they’d started eating everything but food. *Hopefully Twilight’s spell has worn off by now... gosh, I hope they’re all okay.*

“You know, Nikki, I don’t think I’ve ever met a pigeon with a name like yours,” Fluttershy said, as she carefully nudged a small glass jar out of a cabinet and onto her back. “Are you visiting Ponyville from somewhere?”

“*No,*” Nikki muttered, shoving a sunflower seed into her beak. “*A friend gave it to me-*” She cut herself off mid-trill, looking distinctly annoyed with herself.

Aww... “Oh, that’s wonderful,” Fluttershy said, smiling over at the self-conscious pigeon. “Are you somepony’s pet pigeon?”

“*No!*” Nikki squawked. “*And he didn’t name me, either - he started calling me Nikki, but I’m the one who decided to keep it.*”

“Oh, I see,” Fluttershy said, giggling. “I’m sorry.”

Birds are so cute when they're just flown the nest, she thought. They always want to look so independent.

"So who is this pony?" Fluttershy asked, as she started stirring the medicine together. "I'm sure they'll want to know that you're feeling better."

Nikki winced, and Fluttershy thought she saw worry in her eyes. "*Please stop.*"

Fluttershy paused, wanting to ask whether the other pony was alright. But as Nikki pecked at the birdseed, something in her face told Fluttershy that pushing wouldn't get her any answers. "Well, okay."

For a few moments, they didn't talk, Fluttershy humming to herself again as she finished mixing the medicine for the squirrels. Nikki didn't pipe up, either, busying herself with pecking at the birdseed.

"*He fixed my nest,*" Nikki eventually chirped.

Fluttershy blinked. "The pony who started calling you Nikki?"

Nikki nodded. "*He'd come over to put a roof back together. My nest - my scrape, more like - was up there. I'd made it in five seconds the night before. I could make another one just as fast. He could've gotten rid of it even quicker.*"

"And he didn't?" Fluttershy asked.

"*No. He tried to shore it up.*" Nikki smirked. "*Just made a mess instead. But you pay back your favors. I stuck around until I got a chance to, and he paid me back, and I paid him back...*" She absently waved a wing. "*It went on. I guess we're friends now.*"

"That's wonderful," Fluttershy said, smiling. She slung a pair of saddlebags over her back, tucking the medicine inside. "He sounds like a good friend to have. ...Is he alright?"

Nikki's smirk faded, and that look returned to her face. "*I hope so.*"

Fluttershy blinked, but before she got the chance to say anything, the window burst open, and another pigeon swooped inside. “*Boss! He’s up!*”

“...Boss?” Fluttershy asked, bewildered, but Nikki was already on her feet, brushing birdseed crumbs off her beak. “*For how long?*”

“*Just a minute or two, Boss,*” the new pigeon replied. “*The zebra came and started talkin’ to ‘im soon as he sat up.*”

Nikki nodded, then cracked her neck. “*Teach him to scare me... I can fly there. Show me.*”

“Oh, goodness,” Fluttershy said, as Nikki approached the window. “That wing might still be sprained, please be careful-”

Nikki crouched, spreading her wings - then took to the air, straining from the effort but still flying. Fluttershy watched, helpless, as Nikki fluttered uncertainly for a moment, then shot out the window after the other pigeon, cooing no more goodbye than a “*Thanks,*” over her wing.

“Oh my goodness,” Fluttershy mumbled again. Then, carefully, she closed the window again, drawing the curtains and glancing over at the mole in his box. He hadn’t woken up, so Fluttershy turned and headed for the door.

Well, at least I’m not the only pony in Ponyville that talks to animals, she thought. *And it’s nice that Nikki is concerned for him.*

Gosh, I hope he’s okay.

Lapis hadn’t been talking with Zecora for very long, but he was finding the zebra to be surprisingly good conversation.

Sure, the rhyming was a little hard to get used to, and sometimes he had to think for a second to figure out what she was saying through the accent, but to his surprise, they had more than a little in common. She was far from home too, as it turned out - Lapis didn’t share the details of his situation with her, but he did mention that he was from afar, and that he didn’t plan

on staying in Ponyville permanently. Zecora had shared that she hailed from Farasi, a nation that was overseas from Equestria. She'd left her home in search of new discoveries, and was finding the Everfree to be full of exotic ingredients for potion-brewing, as well as a few other oddities.

"Oddities?" Lapis asked, cocking his head. "Are we talking wildlife, or magic, or what?"

Zecora smiled. "Both the wildlife and the magic are strange, it is true. But the strangest of all, was not mentioned by you. Many old places wait below the canopy, many ancient ruins - only some explored by me."

"I have found and read through a few old inscriptions, and from them have gleaned most intriguing descriptions. The Forest Everfree was once the heart of this nation, before the Princess of the Moon fell to fear's cold temptation. There is a castle within the Princesses called home, where they ruled over this land from atop twin thrones. It is where your pursuers found the Elements of Harmony, and of yet more ancient powers, signs are now clear to me. I am sure that more secrets await inside, though deep enough to find them, I have not pried."

"Huh," Lapis muttered. "About how deep in the forest are we talking, here?"

Zecora blinked, her ears cocking forward. "From the edge of the wood, it is four hours' trot. Of joining my search, do you perhaps have a thought?"

Lapis blanched. "Not if it's an eight-hour round trip, I don't. I'm already a week behind on my work, I can't afford to take any more days off anytime soon. ...Especially if the Everfree still has as many big animals as it did the last time I went in there," he added.

Zecora cocked an eyebrow. "There are still many monsters in the forest to rue. But the Everfree Forest, it is not new to you?"

"Yeah," Lapis said, wincing. "I... kinda reached Ponyville after traveling through a part of it. Had an encounter with a Manticore, but I made it out alright. Just barely, though."

A memory flashed through his head, of waking up on a dirt path in an unfamiliar forest, and staggering onto his hooves to take his first slow, clumsy steps in Equestria. “It was a learning experience, I’ll say that much. Anyway, I’ll need some real equipment if I want to go poking around in there again, and even then, it won’t happen until I’m all caught up.”

Zecora nodded, but she seemed confused. “...I fear on your privacy, I must intrude. Yet I find I must take the chance to be rude. Are you drawn to the search only by the mystique, or is there something else in the ruins that you mean to seek?”

“You know how I said I was from a long way out?” Lapis muttered. “Yeah, it’s far enough out that it isn’t on any maps in the village. Still, if I’m lucky - which I don’t think I am - maybe some older records might point me in the right direction.”

What is Equestria in relation to Earth, anyway? Lapis’ initial belief was that he’d somehow gotten trapped in a TV show, but a few days spent living life here had convinced him otherwise - Ponyville seemed, as far as he could tell, like a genuine small town, though one populated by tie-dye equines. So far, the only theories that Lapis could come up with were that he was somehow in a random alternate dimension that *happened* to match the details of the TV show his little sister liked to watch, or that the TV show somehow existed *because* of the alternate dimension. *Or maybe I’m just in a coma, but we’ll burn that bridge when we get to it.*

Anyway. If Equestria was an alternate dimension, then that proved interdimensional travel was possible, just by virtue of the fact that he’d arrived here. That meant, at least in theory, that getting back home was definitely possible. *And if the Ancient Civilizations here are just as super-advanced as most ancient civilizations are in the movies, then maybe - just maybe - there might be something for me to find inside those ruins.*

“I see. It is a terrible thing, to be lost,” Zecora said, and Lapis blinked as he was snapped out of his thoughts. “But to think only of return... is too high of a cost. Are you sure you can’t find, in your present condition, some way to see good inside your situation?”

A shiver ran down Lapis' spine. "Absolutely not. I've got to find a way back, and that's final."

"If you're sure," Zecora said. "...Then I'd advise you to finish the tea. It is a most ancient brew, made from shimmerberry."

"The tea?" Lapis glanced over at his cup, and remembered suddenly that it had liquid inside of it - a transparent purple liquid, with an a sheen on its surface that was somewhere between oily and metallic. It was cold, now, but he took a drink anyway - even cold, it wasn't half bad. "...Huh. 'Shimmerberry,' you said?"

"An ancient fruit, which casters of magic found quite to their suit," Zecora said. "Your magic reserves hold only so large a store, to which the opening this tea will widen yet more. To recover your magic, there is no safer brew - drink. Let it be my gift to you."

"You don't say," Lapis muttered, grinning as he looked down at his mug. "This stuff isn't too expensive, is it?"

Zecora chuckled. "You will find no difficulty in purchasing it. Though I stock my own mix, should you be willing to visit."

Lapis nodded, then downed the rest of the mug. "You know, I think I might take you up on that offer. Though, I might end up needing some help to find your house."

"If you do, I'd advise that you ask Twilight. She could guide you to me, I suspect, even in blackest night." Zecora stood, then turned for the door. "And now, I fear my visit must come to an end, for I see you'll be visited soon by another friend. Farewell, Lapis Print, and good luck to you. Come see me if ever you again need my brew."

"Thanks, see you around!" Lapis called. *Though if I gotta ask Twilight to find you, odds are good I'll never see you again*, he thought, as Zecora left the room.

...Wait. Visited by another friend?

Lapis frowned, then looked around the room, for any sign of another visitor - but no, the clean, sterile-white hospital room was empty besides himself. There was indeed a heart monitor next to him on the bed, connected to a strap of some kind on his foreleg rather than to a clip on his finger. Frowning, he glanced out the window, but saw only the edge of Ponyville, silhouetted by the setting sun - as well as Zecora stepping out of the building, and headed off toward the boundary of the Everfree Forest.

Ancient ruins, Lapis thought. Huh. Definitely a for-later project, then-

“Lapis Print!” a voice shouted.

Lapis gasped, turning to look at the speaker, then sat back in bed. “...Jeez, Bon Bon, calm down a little! I know I was out for a week, but you don’t need to yell... what’s wrong?”

Bon Bon was marching toward his bedside from the door to the room, and something about the cold, hard look on her face brought to mind how she’d switched into drill-sergeant mode on the night of the Summer Sun Celebration. She had a single saddlebag slung over the side of her back, and a glint in her eye that implied she was willing to get physical.

“You are,” she said, coming to a stop beside his bed and glaring down at him. “This has gone on too long, Lapis. No more excuses. No more secrets. Why won’t you go near the Element Bearers?”

Lapis frowned, his heart starting to speed up. “The what? ...Oh. You mean Pinkie and her friends. Look, I don’t know what you’re talking about when it comes to excuses, everything I’ve told you about why I’m avoiding her is true-”

“*Horseapples,*” Bon Bon said, leaning forward and narrowing her eyes. “First it was that you could cast invisibility spells, then it was your basement workshop, and now it’s what I found in your attic.”

Lapis blinked. “My *attic*? Bon Bon, I checked up there already, there was nothing there but the charging array and some cobwebs. Also, ‘spells,’ plural, is definitely an exaggeration - I know one invisibility spell, I cast it once, and for my troubles I got a headache for two hours. And as far as the basement workshop goes - well, let me put it this way, Bon Bon. I want you to say, to my face, that if you found a secret room in your house, you would tell everyone about it.”

His words didn’t seem to quell Bon Bon’s sudden suspicion, as her ears only tucked back further on her head. She straightened up beside his bed and spoke. “Lapis, because I believe there is a tiny, minuscule chance you are telling the truth right now, I am going to be perfectly honest with you. I have sufficient grounds to arrest you on suspicion of espionage, foalnapping, and treason. What you say to me in the next ten minutes is going to determine whether you spend the night here in this hospital bed, or inside of a cell.”

“Bon Bon, wha-” Lapis began, his heart racing, but Bon Bon cut him off with a stomp of her hoof. “Nopony - *nopony* - puts that much effort into avoiding a party, no matter how antisocial they are. Why are you so against having a party at your house? Why won’t you go near the Element Bearers, and why are you studying every spell you can find that will help you disguise yourself and evade pursuers?! *Why won’t you stop running from Pinkie Pie-*”

“Because I CAN’T!” Lapis shouted. “I just... I can’t, okay? Why is this so hard to accept, what part of the word ‘no’ isn’t making sense to you?! Go ahead, you can tell me - is it the ‘N,’ or the ‘O?’”

“It’s the part where you arrived in Ponyville three days before the last Element Bearer did,” Bon Bon said, her voice icy cold, “and managed to get your hooves on the one book that would help her find the Elements of Harmony. It’s also the part where you knew what book to grab to use the tools in your ‘discovered’ secret basement, even before you arrived there. Or how about the part where repeatedly push yourself to the brink of collapse, to the point of having a magic mental breakdown, working on something in your *basement* while the rest of Ponyville is fighting off a swarm of house-eating bugs?” She put her hoof down again. “There are too

many coincidences about you, Lapis, and they don't line up. What are you hiding? Who the hay are you, and why are you running?"

"Because of my family!" Lapis shouted, and he felt something inside himself snap as he said it. "It's... my family, okay? They trusted me, I messed up, and now I'm fixing it."

Bon Bon blinked, then sat back, her gaze still suspicious. "Keep talking."

"Why should I?" Lapis snapped. "What's your problem, what's going on?"

"The kind that will land you in *prison* if you don't. Keep Talking." Bon Bon replied.

Lapis sighed, resting his head on his hoof. *Okay. I've gotta tell her something. The human thing is off the table, that'd just make me sound crazy. Same for the show thing. I don't think I could predict Bon Bon's future, and I could only predict... maybe some major events here? And even then, she still wouldn't have reason to believe me until after they happened.*

"...You know what?" Lapis asked. "Fine. Sure. But remember, you asked for this, okay? You knowing about this is your fault."

"Where I grew up, it's called... A-mare-ica, and things aren't great there. We have plenty of food, but a lot of us don't have enough money to go around, and that means a lot of folks go hungry, for the crime of not being lucky enough. Take that, add disease, war, summers getting hotter and winters getting colder, and you're halfway there."

"I've never heard of it," Bon Bon said, her eyes narrowing.

"Yeah, and you won't find it on any maps, either," Lapis said. "Believe me, I checked. That's the problem. But I'll get there in a second."

"My family was lucky enough, but not by much. I wanted to fix that. I wanted to get some higher education, get a high-paying engineering job, pull us up to someplace better. For that, I needed money that I didn't have,

so I took out a loan. But my signature on it wasn't enough, because if something ever happened to me, the loan company still wanted some way of getting their money. They wanted another signature, and...

Lapis sighed. "My parents signed."

"They knew they couldn't pay that debt. I knew they couldn't pay that debt, and they knew I knew, too. But they signed anyway, because they trusted me.

"So I got the loan, and I studied. For two years. And then... there was some kind of accident. I don't know how or why it happened. One second, I was inside the Sciences Library, and the next I was waking up on some dirt road in the middle of the Everfree Forest. I found my way out, I saw a village, and that's how I got to Ponyville."

Lapis didn't mention his reaction upon waking up. He didn't mention how he'd looked down at where his hands had been, and seen hooves there instead. He didn't mention the way his stomach had lurched when he'd looked along the length of his foreleg and realized all of his joints were backwards, following his new fur all the way onto his torso.

He didn't mention how he'd just gone *numb* for a second, after looking down the length of his own furred, barrel-shaped back from above.

"I could fix stuff. The Mayor saw after I bumped into her, and fixed her glasses. She practically threw the repair-pony job at me. I wasn't sure, but then I realized something.

"Back home, back in Amareica? My family probably thinks I'm dead. And so does the loan company. I know what my parents make, and it's not enough to pay those sharks off for long. If I didn't get myself back there, fast, I'd be putting my own family out on the streets.

"I can't stay here. But I had to get my bearings, I had to get a steady source of food and water, and I had to find a way back home. So I took the job, I did the best I could do, and when I found a book on magic engineering, or 'artifice,' or whatever you want to call it, I started tinkering in my secret

basement,” Lapis said, sitting back in his bed. “And the one thing I’ve put together literally blew up in my face the morning before the Parasprites arrived. That’s who I am. That’s why I was in my basement. That’s why I’m here now. You happy?”

He glanced over, and saw that Bon Bon’s expression was... odd. She looked either conflicted, or concerned... *or constipated, maybe?*

“But... what about Pinkie?” she asked. “That still doesn’t explain why you’re so desperate to avoid her.”

No, it doesn’t. Lapis sighed and leaned back into his pillow, shutting his eyes and trying to think of something. And then an idea came to him.

It wasn’t the whole truth. But - with some shock - Lapis realized it was a part of the truth, a big enough part that it hurt when he thought about it. And that made it better, at least marginally, than a lie.

“Bon Bon, Pinkie throws a party for every pony that comes to stay in Ponyville,” Lapis said.

“Yeah, she does. Why does that matter?”

“It matters,” Lapis sighed, “because I haven’t come here to stay. I *can’t* stay here.” He swallowed, then continued.

“Look, you and Lyra, you’re right. I get it. I’ve done the math. The longer I evade Pinkie, the harder it’ll be to avoid her, and the bigger the eventual party will be. And you know what? I *want* to have that party. I want to take a second to catch my breath, to smile, laugh, joke around, meet more ponies, act like nothing’s wrong. I want to just have fun for a night, I want to be happy here. I want to stop.

“I can’t,” Lapis said, and he realized his voice was shaking. “Because it’s not Pinkie I’m running from.

“It’s guilt. For letting my parents sign those damn loans, for letting myself disappear, for not making things right yet. It’s a great big boulder of guilt,

and it's rolling downhill after me, and it's faster and heavier than any job, any workload, any *pony* could ever be. And if I stop, if I even slow down, it will crush me.

"I can't stop, Bon Bon." And for some reason, Lapis' throat was too tight, and he could barely get the words to come out louder than a whisper.

"But I'm getting so damn tired."

He couldn't meet Bon Bon's eyes, so he kept his own closed, forcing his forehooves to stop shaking atop his blankets. "...Okay, you know what? It's stupid, you don't believe it, and honestly, I'm not sure why I said anything. Maybe it's something in this tea, I don't know. But it's the truth. So, do you want me to trot to my cell, or are we gonna roll-"

Something soft, warm, and heavy wrapped around Lapis' chest, squeezing gently around his body. Lapis frowned, then opened his eyes.

Bon Bon was hugging him. She'd done it awkwardly - he was still lying on his back on the bed, so she'd had to sort of worm her hooves underneath his torso. On top of that, a good half of her weight was on him, so he was finding it a little difficult to breathe.

But all the same, she was hugging him, and the last time Lapis had gotten a hug was when his parents had dropped him off at the end of winter break. He wrapped his own forelegs around her.

Eventually, they let go, and Bon Bon took a few steps away from the bed, grimacing again. "I... I'm sorry, Lapis. I didn't know, and... I'm sorry."

Lapis chuckled. "Bon Bon, I never told you. Honestly, if you had known, I'd be worried."

"Well, yes. But still, I..." She sighed. "I found something in your house, Lapis, and I guess I overreacted a little bit."

Lapis frowned. *Found something? I don't think I ever wrote down anything about Earth, or being human.* "What do you mean?"

Bon Bon hesitated, then she reached into her saddlebag with a hoof and pulled something out. "Do you know what this is?"

Lapis leaned forward, peering down at the object in the center of Bon Bon's hoof. For a moment, he was confused by the matte-black, almost burnt-looking lump of dark material, until he spotted the flecks of copper glinting in its surface. "...Some kind of artifice-compatible solder, I think. Whatever pony built the collection array used the stuff to weld the central copper rod to the roof. Why, does it matter?"

"Yes," Bon Bon said. "Yes, it does. It's not solder, it's wax. And it's made by a very secretive, very dangerous kind of shape-shifting monster. I found it, and I thought... that you were one of them."

"A shape-shifting monster..." Lapis muttered, then - wincing at the pain in his horn - he levitated the chunk of wax off Bon Bon's hoof, trying and failing to mush it around in his grip. "Well, it's definitely harder than beeswax."

Bon Bon scoffed, then actually giggled. "Unfortunately, yes. ...Listen, I'd prefer not to talk about it too much, but if you find any more of this stuff, in Ponyville or anywhere else, then... come get me, as soon as you can, and be on your guard until you do. If you can do the job you were paid to do, then do it and get out, but be careful until you get to me. Just in case somepony around you turns out not to be a pony."

Lapis chuckled nervously. "Bon Bon, what is this, *Invasion of the Pony Snatchers?*"

"Yes," Bon Bon said, not a trace of humor in her voice. And suddenly, Lapis remembered one of the episodes. A two-parter, one his little sister had watched over and over again. The wedding, the princess and the royal guard, the succubus-bug-pony-thing with the green fire.

Princess Celestia, in a pod on the ceiling.

“...Right,” Lapis said, and suddenly the chunk of wax in his magical grip seemed a lot heavier than it had before. “I’ll keep an eye out.” Yeah, *Bon Bon definitely isn’t just a cop.*

“Thanks,” Bon Bon said. “I’ll be taking that wax back. I’ll need to show it to Lyra.”

“Sure thing,” Lapis said, giving her the wax. “...Hey, so, listen. Thanks for-” He paused, cutting off as he heard a tapping at the window.

Bon Bon frowned, looking over. “Huh. A pigeon. I don’t think that’s Nikki, though.”

Lapis opened the window, and the pigeon fluttered inside, then called out a quick coo. Frowning at the unfamiliar bird, Lapis looked back toward the window and smiled as he spotted Nikki winging her way toward them.
“There she is! How’d you know I was-”

Nikki briefly tucked her wings in, swooping in through the window at top speed, then snapped her wing to its full length as she cruised toward Lapis’ face. He just had time to shut his eyes before the impact, and the force of Nikki’s maximum-force *slap* tipped him to the side just enough that he ended up falling out of bed.

“Ow,” Lapis muttered. Overhead, Bon Bon gaped, and Nikki pulled a tight banking turn to perch atop Lapis’ head, glaring down at him over the top of his horn. “Okay, yeah, I’ll try not to do that again.”

“...Poor Fluttershy,” Bon Bon muttered.

Nikki shot Bon Bon a look as Lapis climbed to his hooves. He was still a little shaky, probably from not getting out of bed for a week, but - to his pleased surprise - he felt up for a walk. “Alright, so I guess I’m out of bed now, and my backlog is waiting for me. What do you say we find out how I check out of here?”

“I don’t think-” Bon Bon began, but a sudden, loud beeping from the heart monitor next to Lapis’ bed cut her off. Lapis glanced down at his hoof, and

found that the cable connecting the cuff on his foreleg to the heart monitor had been snapped in the fall.

A brief jolt of realization shot through Lapis, and he turned toward the door, from outside of which the sudden sound of galloping hooves was growing louder. “I’M OKAY!” he bellowed. “I’M NOT DYING, I JUST FELL OUT OF BED! SORRY!”

A sigh came from outside the door, and a white-coated mare with a pale pink mane and a nurse’s hat poked her head around the corner, a bright red bag that looked suspiciously full of defibrillators slung across her shoulders. “Thank you, sir. Please keep your voice down.”

“Right. Got it. Sorry again,” Lapis said.

The nurse briefly looked around the room, taking in both Nikki and the second pigeon now sitting atop Lapis’ headboard, then added, “And no pets, either.”

Nikki squawked, outraged. Bon Bon sighed and shook her head, and all Lapis could do was grin. He’d done it. He’d spilled part of the secret, and he hadn’t been ostracized or sent to any kind of secret lab. On top of that, thanks to Zecora’s chat, he might even have a new place to look for a way home. All in all, even with the week-long backlog, things couldn’t have turned out any better.

...Even if that boulder is just a little heavier now.

Author's Notes:

Patch Notes: Again, none. But this time I have a good reason, I promise - I'm looking through the chapters, trying to find any big formatting errors and patch them. I've squished a couple so far, but there's definitely still more to go.

Alrighty, so, for what it's worth, I did try to write this one a little on the funny side. But Lapis had to spill some beans, and I figured there would be some emotion attached to that, so here we are. Note the absence of Pinkie Pie in this chapter: I *think* this is the first single-part chapter where she hasn't made at least a brief appearance.

Also, in this chapter, I did something I never expected to do for a story: I made a bell curve. And no, I'm not sharing it. My insanity is a curse, and I refuse to pass it on to any of you. Suffice to say, the numbers that Twilight threw at Mayor Mare weren't nearly as random as you might otherwise think they were. It's only an internal reference, as the specifics of unicorns' innate capacities for magical power will probably never matter for story purposes (unless at some point I want to make an unfunnily long and contrived over-9000 joke about Celestia, in which case they'll get *very* important very quickly.)

And finally, about which of the Mane 6 did/n't make an appearance in this chapter. I opted to cover the most immediate, present-tense threats to Lapis' secrecy, aside from those already introduced. That leaves Rainbow and Rarity unaccounted for, save for a couple details mentioned in Twilight's un-damage report: one cloud with some suspicious right angles, and one building spared from the OCD-ing.

...Oh, and maybe *one* other little thing earlier in the story.

See you in the next one!

8: C'mon Over Now, Ya Hear?

It was sunset, and the edges of the clouds were just beginning to turn gold. At the far end of the sky from the sun, a few stars were beginning to dully gleam through the deep, rich indigo-blue of the sky, just above the low, rolling hills of the plains around Ponyville. A steady, cool breeze was rolling over those hills and into the village, washing over the grass in slow, rippling waves. It set the dark, narrow leaves of the nearby trees swaying, and seemed almost to softly whisper as Lapis, Nikki, and Bon Bon made their way along the road that connected Ponyville General Hospital to the rest of the village.

“...Listen, for real,” Lapis said, as he slowly trudged around a bend, “I’m fine. And I’m not going to do any work once I get back, either - at most, I’m finding a doorstop, tidying up a little, and getting to bed.”

Bon Bon smirked. “Forgive me for not taking you at your word, Lapis. But I’m walking you home, then I’m bringing over Lyra and some chow. Lyra wouldn’t talk to me for weeks if I did anything less, and besides, I’m sure she’s got her own questions to ask.”

“Guess I can’t argue with that,” Lapis replied, and he felt his ears briefly flick backwards atop his head. He straightened them, then asked, “Anything interesting happen while I was out?”

Bon Bon shook her head. “Not much. Mayor Mare gave an official speech about the Parasprites- sorry, the bug-things that tore up the village.” She sighed. “Apparently *Fluttershy* of all ponies led one here from the Everfree, and it multiplied.”

Lapis cocked an eyebrow. “The Everfree? Wait, if they live in there normally, how come the whole forest isn’t just stumps by now?”

“Well, normally they only eat crops, berries, or other things you or I could eat,” Bon Bon said, “but then Twilight cast a spell to make them stop eating

all the food, and it worked.”

“That figures,” Lapis said, nodding. “I can almost see how Fluttershy might’ve thought they were fine - before they started eating everything, they were almost cute.”

“Maybe,” Bon Bon said. “Anyway, it was Pinkie Pie who managed to lead them away. Apparently, on top of being Pinkie Pie, she’s also a one-pony band.”

“You know, if I hadn’t seen her in action, I’d be pretty confused right now,” Lapis said. “Though I’m pretty sure ‘be a one-pony band’ is just one more part of the job description for Pinkie Pie.”

“She went by you?” Bon Bon asked.

“Well, she passed by the end of the road I was on, and that was close enough for the bugs to follow after her.” Lapis remembered the odd look on Pinkie’s face, and cocked his head. “You know, I don’t think I’ve ever seen Pinkie that pi- uh, cheersed off before.”

“Lapis, you’re not hiding your home country from me anymore, you can use your native curses,” Bon Bon said, rolling her eyes. “But yeah, she wasn’t too happy. I’ve seen worse, though.”

“When?” Lapis asked, glancing over.

Bon Bon shuddered. “Word of advice: if you ever make a Pinkie Promise, then never, ever break it. You think she’s been chasing you so far? If you break a Pinkie Promise, then she knows, and she *will* find you.”

“...Good to know,” Lapis said, filing that piece of information away for later.

They reached Lapis’ house not long afterward. Nikki settled down on the table for a nap, while Bon Bon quickly excused herself to go get Lyra - leaving Lapis to take in what he’d done to his house.

Bon Bon had shared some of the details of Lapis' magical... accident with him, but this was the first time he'd actually seen any of it. Outside of the basement, everything really seemed to be in a grid pattern - even the fallen pigeon feathers that still littered his living room floor, until he swept them up.

His kitchen was neater than he'd ever gotten it, and all the dishes were sparkling clean. His bed was so tightly made that he suspected the blankets might tear if he jumped on them - not that he was feeling energetic enough to do so - and even the guest bedroom seemed not to have a speck of dust inside. *Almost wish I could do that on purpose...*

Lapis remembered the feeling of being choked, held aloft in the air by his own magic, the fiery, pulsing pressure that had seemed to tear his head in two by the horn. He shivered. *Actually, no thanks.*

Taking one look at the site of the incident was more than enough to reinforce his reluctance. It was still chaos in his basement, but now, it was sculpted chaos - the spirals drew wide, smoothly-curving arcs of gathered wreckage from the spot where he'd collapsed to the very edges of the room, leaving the floor almost bare everywhere else.

With a spike of toothache-like pain from his horn, Lapis picked up one of the broken hammers off the floor. Like all the rest of his tools, the Parasprites had eaten it in half - and not in the "just-the-handle" or "just-the-head" sense, either. No, they'd chomped along it in a straight, tooth-marked line from the handle to the tip, as if the hammer was an unusually useful cob of corn.

Lapis wasn't sure it was worth hanging it back up, but he hooked it onto the tool rack anyway. He was starting to consider picking up the scrap paper, but the second he decided to just get it over with, he heard his door swinging open upstairs. "Lapis?" Lyra's voice called.

"On my way up," he replied, and he was halfway up the stairs when the reverberating sound of the door's locking mechanism echoed down to him. He winced; it sounded like she'd rammed into the door full-speed.

“You alright up there?” he called, ascending the rest of the way into the closet and closing the false wall behind him. “Sounded like you hit that door pretty hard-”

He pushed open the door again, and was only out by a few steps before Lyra tackled him into a hug, almost crushing the air out of his lungs.

“Whoa! Hey, nice to see you too.”

From the door, Bon Bon rolled her eyes and smirked, setting down a carry-out bag atop Lapis’ table. Lyra let go after a second or two, her ears flopping back on her head. “Sorry, Bon Bon filled me in a little on the way here, and... well, I had no idea, and... I guess, I’m glad you’re okay, but are you sure you’re okay?”

“...I’m feeling about as good as I can, Lyra,” Lapis replied, trying to plaster on a reassuring smile. “It’s a mess, but at least I’m out of the hospital, and I can start cleaning it up-”

“*Tomorrow*,” Bon Bon said, while Nikki opened one eye long enough to shoot him a glare that basically said the same thing. “Right now, you’re doing nothing but eating, and explaining to Lyra whatever the hay she asks you to explain.”

Lyra perked right up at the mention of food. “Ooh! Does that mean we can crack into that barrel of cider?”

“What barrel of...” Lapis started asking, but at the sight of the barrel sitting on top of his counter, he cut himself off. “Uh, did you bring this here?”

“It’s a test batch of cider, from the Apple family,” Bon Bon said. “Big Macintosh and I were talking the other day, and you came up. I know he’s Applejack’s brother, and Applejack is one of Pinkie’s friends, but...”

“Don’t worry about it,” Lapis said, looking over the barrel for a spigot - it was on the inside of the counter, as it turned out. “I’d be happy to share, I just don’t know if I have enough cups...”

It turned out, Lapis did *not* have enough cups. Lyra got a glass, but Bon Bon was shortly holding a coffee mug, and Lapis eventually wound up grabbing a small bowl from his cabinet and filling it from the tap. The cider was a little bit sour, but Lapis didn't mind - it was still the best he'd ever tasted, and the tartness paired well with the spicy hay dogs that Bon Bon had brought over.

"So," Bon Bon said, picking up her hay dog for a second bite, "is there anything you wanted to ask Lapis, Lyra... Lyra?"

Lapis swallowed, then looked up from his food - to find Lyra busy chugging her cider at top speed, her barely-nibbled hay dog floating in the air beside her wide and teary eyes. "Whoa, slow down there, you'll grow gills!"

Lyra drained the last few drops from her glass, then set it down, blinking away the tears in her eyes. "Whatever you do, don't try the Happy Sauce," she wheezed, setting the hay dog down on the table in its wrapper and heading for the cider barrel at half a gallop, the empty glass floating away after her.

Lapis and Bon Bon exchanged a glance, then took a closer look at Lyra's hot dog. There was a thin trail of some condiment drizzled across the top layer of cheese, one that had a clearer oily sheen than any topping Lapis had ever seen - it almost seemed to glow, like he was looking at a rainbow through a window made of barbecue sauce.

"...‘Happy Sauce?’" Lapis muttered, turning to inspect Lyra's place. Sitting on the table nearby was a small glass bottle almost full of the strange condiment - which, now that Lapis looked at it, was definitely glowing. The bottle had no label - instead, it had a small, ominous smiley face painted on its side, backlit by the rainbow sheen of the vaguely-brown substance.

Bon Bon caught sight of the bottle and sighed. "Lyra, I thought you knew what you were getting into with that stuff!"

Behind the counter, Lyra gasped for breath as she rose from the depths of her glass of cider. "I didn't think it was made with real rainbow! I thought it

was, like, Zap-Apple glaze or something!"

"Why in Equestria would Mane-Street Dogs be selling Zap-Apple glaze?" Bon Bon said, spreading her hooves. "Zap-Apples are an Apple family specialty, there's no way they'd let anypony else sell Zap-Apple produce!"

"Zap-Apples?" Lapis asked, frowning.

"They're a special kind of rainbow-colored, magical apple," Bon Bon explained, as Lyra took a deep breath and dove back into her glass of cider. "The Apple family have the only domestic Zap-Apple crop in Equestria, and they can only sell Zap-Apple jam once a year. The stuff's delicious... unlike *actual* rainbows, such as what's in that 'Happy Sauce.' Real rainbows are pretty to look at, but they taste spicy and nothing else besides."

"O-kay," Lapis said, setting aside the question of how purified rainbow could make its way into a condiment. He levitated the bottle of Happy Sauce over. "...No redeeming qualities? No habanero fruitiness, or anything?"

"Nope," Lyra rasped, settling back into her seat with a quarter-full glass of cider. "Just spicy. And it's gotta be mixed with honey or something in that bottle, 'cause it just *glued* onto my tongue." She scrunched up her face and stuck out her tongue, which still had a faint rainbow-y sheen. "Eugh."

Lapis hesitated. Then, slowly and deliberately, he uncorked the bottle.

"Lapis," Bon Bon said, in a calm, flat tone.

"Look," Lapis said, slowly depositing a single drop of the sauce onto his hay dog. "I've never met a type of spicy pepper that wasn't worth finding a way to eat. Chipotles are smoky, jalapeños are nice on just about anything, and even Scotch Bonnets are good in a 3-pound pot of chili."

"Peppers are one thing, rainbows are another," Lyra said, her eyes growing wide again. "Don't do it, Lapis."

"I've got to," Lapis said, raising the hot dog to his lips. "If I don't, I'll wish I did."

Then, he took a bite and began to chew. For a few moments, he couldn't even tell anything was different. Then the drop of Happy Sauce found its way onto Lapis' tongue.

Lapis blinked, grunting in pain, and Lyra snickered as he quickly levitated his own cider glass to his lips. Instead of chugging it, though, he took one mouthful and swished it around over his tongue, expecting the acidity of the cider to help dissolve the drop of sauce in his mouth. Instead of fading, the burning sensation on Lapis' tongue began to spread beyond the small, smoldering smear of Happy Sauce, and he knew he'd made a mistake.

Well, there goes that plan. Lapis swallowed, grimacing as the fiery-sour cocktail of half-chewed hay dog sizzled its way down his throat, then opened his mouth to speak - but, with the first breath that hit the inside of his mouth, the leftover Happy Sauce was able to get in one last word, and he wound up coughing instead of speaking.

"Wishing you hadn't?" Bon Bon asked.

Lapis coughed again, then managed to wash down the sauce with one last swig of cider. "Yeah, maybe a little."

The rest of dinner passed mostly without incident. They ended up making small talk over dinner, and mostly avoided the reasons that Lapis had wound up in the hospital. Lyra gave him a quick, non-rhyming run-down on how Harmonic Cascades worked, and added that the average unicorn needed 3 days' worth of rest - or minimal labor, at least - to replenish their magical stores. Lapis found himself glad for the information, as he'd so far assumed that his reservoir could be charged back up by a good night's sleep alone.

Not too long afterward, Lyra and Bon Bon excused themselves, and Lapis headed to bed only a few minutes after they were gone, taking a few minutes to tug his blankets loose enough to lie beneath. Lapis passed out almost as soon as his head hit the pillow...

...He felt it in his gut as the drill rumbled beneath his feet, set his jaw at the clank of the angular, blunt-ended, tripartite metal doors before him. They slid up and to either side, opening to reveal churning, pale rock, going by in the bright floodlights fast enough to be little more than a dusty blur. His stomach lurched as the drop pod breached the stone and free-fell, just for a moment, through the mostly-empty air of the cavern. Something screeched as the teeth of the drill caught it midair, tearing it into chunky green paste with no more ceremony than a brief, wet crunch.

Then, the pod landed. He rose from his seat as the grate before the doors parted like a mouth, leaving no barrier between himself and the caverns outside. He hesitated only a moment, glancing briefly at the small screen beside the doors, where a red triangle was accompanied by the warning: 'HAUNTED CAVE.'

Cave's haunted, he thought, and he loaded the rifle at his side, a metallic ping echoing through the cavern as he floated the magazine into its slot. Then, as the ramp extended down before the door, he galloped down at full speed, tossing a blue glowstick ahead of himself as he charged through the cloud of dust.

He needn't have bothered. This wasn't the biggest cavern he'd seen, but it was one of the brightest - every few square yards, luminous lumps of pale-cyan crystal sprouted from the pale stone of the cave, each at least three times bigger than he was. He paused, waiting for Mission Control to deliver one of his usual speeches about the mission objective, but there was nothing from his headset save a subtle, sinister hiss of static. A pigeon flew past his head, trilling a tone that sounded as if it would be more at home coming from a machine.

Shrugging, he switched to his flare gun, aimed at the few dark patches of the cavern's walls and ceiling, and fired. The flares shot through the air as gleaming-white blurs, casting broad circles of light across the dim patches, bringing to light gleaming veins of gold and glittering red crystal. Above, a massive portion of the cavern's ceiling disintegrated into gravel and dust, and another enormous drill pulled a tangle of metal mesh and machinery

into the cave floor a second later. The mass unfolded in a blocky bloom of ramps and wire lattice, revealing a metallic cylinder - a giant, gleaming ballpoint pen - enclosed by a ring-shaped platform, floodlights and turrets mounted around the circumference at regular intervals. The turrets rattled to life, twisting and angling, their barrels popping in mathematical, synchronized rhythm. High in the cave, a few rustling blurs shattered into sprays of green gunk before he got a chance to tell what they were.

He drew his grappling hook and pointed it at the space above one of the blue crystals, pulling the trigger. The hook sank into the stone, and a second later, he was whirring through the air at speed, his hooves clicking against the hard crystal as he touched down. Pulling out his pickaxe, he began to break one of the veins of red substance off the walls. Once he finished, he aimed the hook at another vantage point, this one near to a vein of gold, and zipped over to repeat the process. He didn't let down his guard - nothing was pestering him yet, and the turrets would do a lot of the work for him, but he still might only get a breath or two to react.

Deep in some far crevice of the cavern, something thumped. A second later, the sound of a section of stone crumbling met his ears, chunks almost clacking as they shattered against each others' sides. The pigeon perched on a protrusion of the vein of gold, shooting him a questioning look.

He lowered the pickaxe. "Cave's haunted," he explained.

The pigeon furrowed its brow, blinking with sharp, deep cyan eyes that almost seemed to glow.

"Cave's haunted," he repeated, raising the pickaxe. Then, he resumed chipping away at the vein of gold.

A few seconds later, he was done, and decided it was about time to work on the mission objective. He turned toward a narrow opening in the cavern, in the opposite side of the cave from where the sound of breaking stone had come a few moments before. One grappling-hook later, he was through the maw of the smaller cavern, squeezing between slanted, hex-shaped crystals of white quartz.

A smattering of small, glowing blue dots of crystal on one of the cave walls alerted him to his objective. Approaching their rough midpoint, he stared briefly at the wall, trying to decide what would be the best angle to dig into the stone through. Then, having made his decision, he raised the pick and began to swing it, the metal clicking against the stone.

One. Two. Three. And the stone didn't crumble away.

Four. Five. A small hemisphere of rock crumbled, and he switched to another section. It, too, took five swings, instead of the three that he knew it ought to.

Again. And again. Until finally, his prize popped free of the rock - instead of another crystal, a small, dully-gleaming suitcase, locked shut. From its seam, the corner of a green paper bill was poking free, the number 100 barely visible in the shadows of the cave.

The sound of breaking stone echoed out again, far louder this time. He paused. That sounds like it's right under me, he thought.

The next moment, he had his grappling hook out, and was zipping back to the pillars of white quartz. He started to squeeze between them, making it a few steps inside - then, confetti began to fall around his head, and he paused-

The stone beneath his feet vanished, and he fell, the pigeon squawking in alarm. Below him, Pnkie Pie's enormous, smiling, bubblegum-pink face waited. "Hi!" she piped, smiling, and then she rushed up toward him-

He turned his grappling hook to the ceiling, knowing already that there was nothing close enough to grapple to, and saw the pigeon swooping down toward him-

Lapis sat bolt upright in bed, gasping for breath, sweat pouring off his face. He looked to the window, his heart pounding in his chest, and saw that the moon was still high in the sky.

Comprehension dawned on him a few seconds later. He groaned, then flopped back onto his pillow. *Okay, no Happy Sauce before bed. Good to know. Let's get some sleep.*

When he woke up the following morning, he set about cleaning up his home. That ended up being an all-day project, even with Lyra dropping by to lend a hoof and Nikki doing the dusting (in exchange for some birdseed, of course.)

The morning after that, he found himself heading down to his basement before breakfast. He'd put the workshop back together as well as he could, but all his tools were still broken, and he couldn't fix them without the parts that the Parasprites had eaten. He was tempted to give them a shot anyway, to see if he could put something together with the damaged tools.

Eventually, though, he decided there wasn't much point - he still had that backlog to get to, and besides, he didn't even know what he wanted to build. So, he turned and headed back upstairs, fixed himself some breakfast, and sat down to eat. Lapis took a swig of the coffee, found that it had already cooled considerably, and was helping himself to another few mouthfuls when he spotted something on the other side of the window. Turning the corner onto the main street was an orange Earth-pony with a blondish sort of mane and a weathered brown Stetson hat.

He recognized the pony at once, and frowned. *Huh. That's odd.* Normally, he didn't see Applejack in town unless it was a weekend - he assumed that farmwork in the summer kept her too busy for much leisure.

Wonder what's going on there, Lapis thought, watching as Applejack stopped another pony - *hey, it's Derpy Hooves! She's up early* - and struck up some brief conversation. *Whatever Applejack's doing, I probably won't need to work around her.*

Then Derpy pointed right toward Lapis' shop.

Uh. Derpy? What're you doing?

Applejack nodded and smiled. Then, she turned right toward Lapis' shop.

Derpy?!

Applejack started heading toward Lapis' shop at a brisk trot.

Derpy, what did you DO?! Lapis stood up, grabbed his mug and plate, and hurried back into the kitchen, closing the door behind himself and bracing it shut.

This was bad. This was very, very bad. One of the protagonists was actually coming to visit him, directly. *Why? Why now? Why today? I'm gonna need to move. I'll need to find a whole new shop, I'll have to pack all my damn stuff, and-*

Lapis was shaken from his thoughts by a knock at the door. "Hello?" a twangy voice called, muffled by the walls. "Anypony home?"

Please go away. Please go away. Please go away.

"...S'pose not, huh?"

"Yeah, he usually isn't," said another voice - Derpy's, Lapis thought. "That's what the corkboard's for, see? You take one of these little slips, write up what you need, and stick it to the board with a tack. Then, once he's done his job, you drop the bits here, and that's that!"

"Huh," Applejack replied. "This feller's got it down to a business then, don't he?"

"He has to, y'know? A lot of stuff gets broken in Ponyville." Derpy chuckled. "I hit a lot fewer mailboxes now than I used to, but that barely puts a dent in all this."

"Ya don't say," Applejack muttered, and the sound of rustling paper reached Lapis' ears. "...Hold on, does this one say it's from the Mayor?"

"Probably. 'Check support beams and arches for central stage room...' Wow, that's a lot of arches."

“So, he won’t arrive for at least a day?”

“At *most* a day,” Derpy said. “He’s got a lot on his plate, but he’s *fast*. You won’t need to worry about your rafter for long.”

“If ya say so,” Applejack replied, and a second or two later the distinct thunk of a tack entering the request-board reached Lapis’ ears. “Anyhow, Ah was goin’ to meet up with Pinkie Pie, and see if she knew any good places to pick up some bakin’ supplies...”

Applejack’s voice faded out as she and Derpy wandered off, but the gears were already turning in Lapis’ head. *Okay, this is salvageable. She’s got a broken rafter, or something?*

Lapis waited a few more seconds, then set down his breakfast, rushed to the notice board, grabbed the new request slip, and hurried back inside to look it over. *Yeah, a broken rafter. She just wants it braced. But it sounds like Applejack’s going to be preoccupied in town for at least a little while, so...*

Lapis nodded, set his jaw, then trotted back into the kitchen and slammed back his entire mug of coffee. *So, if I knock this out right now, then there’s no risk of running into Applejack, and I’ll be headed back home in time for lunch.*

Yeah. Lapis smirked down at his breakfast sandwich. *It’ll be that easy. Sure.*

He stuffed the rest of the sandwich into his mouth. Then, ten seconds later, he was out the door and headed for the Apple family farm.

It was a cloudy day in Ponyville. The sun wasn’t shining, instead casting its diffused glow through the pale, near-white color of the sky, which was only occasionally highlighted by a wisp of thicker cloud cover. That wasn’t to say it was gloomy, though - birds were still singing in the trees, and even the sporadic rustling noises of the critters seemed to be somehow cheerful. The emerald canopies of the trees on Sweet Apple Acres, some still dotted with the gleaming scarlet shapes of apples, almost brought a smile to Lapis’

face as he slowly, carefully advanced up the hill toward the Apple family barn.

The job he was here to do was simple, at least on its surface. One of the rafters in the Apple family's storage barn was cracked, and they wanted it braced, so there was no chance of its falling apart at an inopportune time. Or at any time.

Lapis, however, had an entire barrel of the Apple family's cider sitting on his counter, apparently donated by Big Mac and the rest of the family as a get-well-soon gift, and so he suspected subtler means. The Apple family was one of the more self-sufficient families in Ponyville. They'd raised their own barns before; if they wanted their rafter braced up, there was a fair chance they could do it themselves.

As evidence went, it wasn't much to go off of. But, to Lapis, there was a fair chance that the repair slip in his bag was little more than a convenient excuse to get him to come over, have some dinner, and get to know him a little. And considering he'd had to take a half-hour's detour on the way to Sweet Apple Acres, in order to avoid the side of town where Rainbow Dash was organizing some cloud-clearing, Lapis got the feeling that today wasn't a good day to take his chances.

Under any other circumstances, Lapis would've been almost happy to head on over, but there was a problem: Applejack Apple. Applejack, as it happened, was one of the Element Bearers - meaning, if he went anywhere near her, there was a very good chance he'd mess up the timeline. And if that happened, then Lapis would lose one of the few precious advantages he had in Equestria: his knowledge, however patchy, of the future. Not to mention the possibility that, by changing the future, Lapis would somehow disrupt the general tendency of Equestria to let things generally turn out alright.

It was, at least in his mind, entirely possible that the fate of the world rested on Applejack's not seeing him repair the barn's roof, and therefore, it was justified that he should come up with some brilliant plan.

Unfortunately, Lapis didn't have a plan.

I mean, I tried, he thought, as he rounded a dense cluster of apple trees, finally catching sight of the barn. I was coming up with ideas all the way here. But at the end of the day, the thing I've learned is...

Lapis caught sight of who was on the Apple family's front lawn, and froze in his tracks, his eyes snapping wide open.

...The thing is, no plan survives contact with Ponyville.

On the one hand, Applejack was nowhere in sight. This was good; it meant that she might still be in Ponyville, and that Lapis could proceed as if she weren't around.

On the other hand, Pinkie and Twilight were both on Applejack's lawn. This was bad.

Reflexively, Lapis yanked the mask out of his saddlebag and strapped it across his face, ducking behind a tree as he went. *Okay. This is... fine. Sure. I can just go away, and come back later. It'll give me time to come up with some better ideas.*

...Or, for all I know, Pinkie is just hanging out here for the week, and I'll have no idea until Applejack thinks I'm avoiding her on purpose. And if that happens, she might leave me alone... or, she might make a point of hunting me down to find out what my problem is.

Lapis sighed, attempting to facehoof, but only succeeded in smashing his entire face under the mask, wincing and pulling his hoof away. *Why can't anything be easy?*

He peeked around the tree, trying to observe what Twilight and Pinkie were up to. Pinkie seemed, as far as Lapis could tell, to just be going about her day as normal - just then, she was smelling some flowers. Lapis quickly switched his focus to Twilight.

She was... training a pair of binoculars on Pinkie, from the opposite side of a small stack of hay bales next to the door of the storage barn that Lapis had to make his way into. Lapis cocked his head, then took a closer look.

Twilight was wearing what looked like a pith hat, over a look of grim determination. She was covered in Band-Aids - which, for some reason, were the same hue of pale brown as back on Earth - and she was dictating to Spike. Spike, meanwhile, was bearing nothing unusual besides a notepad and a pencil, taking notes while Twilight spoke.

...Well, Lapis thought, at least those binoculars aren't pointed at me, and at least she isn't guarding the door on purpose. Still, I'd better not get her attention. There's a lot of trees here, but the binoculars might still make it easier for her to track me down.

...Not to mention Pinkie's still around. Running from Twilight when it was just Twilight almost got me caught, but I definitely don't think I could escape from Twilight and Pinkie at the same time. Lapis swallowed, and he felt his ears flop back on his head.

Then again, she's pretty focused on Pinkie... maybe I could just sneak around behind her? Lapis considered the idea for all of five seconds before snorting and shaking his head, deliberately flicking his ears back upright. *Sneaking up from behind is the last thing you ever do to a horse. The last thing.*

...I just got out of the hospital for overuse of magic, damn it. Don't make me cast that invisibility spell again, I barely remember the incantation. Please. Please?

Lapis grimaced. Then, slowly, he rounded the tree and started creeping up the hill through the orchards, keeping the incantation in mind without reciting it. He stayed low, doing his best to keep out of Twilight's field of view - which, sadly, meant going behind her. Through sheer dumb luck, Pinkie didn't seem to be looking his way, either. Occasionally she would glance in his and Twilight's shared general direction, and Lapis would freeze where he was, hardly daring to breathe, until he looked away.

He got within ten yards of the door, got into a bush, and suddenly realized how stupid he was being. *What the hell was I thinking?! I should've just stayed put and waited for them to leave, then come back later!*

Focus. I can still do this. This barn probably has a back door. If it does, then I can go through there, fix the rafter, and get out. And if it doesn't, well, that just puts a whole barn between me and these three.

Lapis hesitated, then rose from the bushes, not taking his eyes off Twilight and Spike as he crossed below the white picket-fence that outlined the Apple family's residence- and his hooves thunked down on something wooden, loud.

Shitshitshit! Lapis dove over the fence and back into the bush at once, only remembering after a second to tug his tail in behind him. He didn't dare to stick his head clear of the shrubbery, opting instead to peer through the foliage.

To his dismay, Twilight had perked up- but she wasn't looking at him. Instead, her gaze was trained on Pinkie, who appeared to be having some kind of muscle spasm - as Lapis watched, bewildered, her ears flopped forward and back atop her head, her eyes fluttered, and her knees jittered beneath her.

"Hold on," Lapis heard Spike say, and he turned back to look at Twilight and Spike. "You told me that's the combo that says 'watch out for opening doors!'"

Twilight scoffed as Spike abandoned the cover of the hay-bales, seeking shelter behind another stack nearer to Pinkie. "You really, really believe in this stuff, don't you? Here, let me show you there's nothing to be afraid of."

...Oh, this is Pinkie-sense stuff. 'Watch out for opening doors?' Like, when they slam open and catch on your leg? Lapis frowned, watching as Spike continued to cower. Then, he looked at the space where he'd stepped a few moments before, and blinked in surprise - there, set into the earth and painted red, was what looked like the door to a storm shelter. *Well, I guess I could disarm this one. Just in case.*

Lapis gave the handle of the door a brief, sharp magical yank, and the door swung open, the glow of his magic on the handle only visible for the briefest moment. His satisfied grin froze on his face as Twilight approached the doorway, not looking where she was going, and dropped directly into the stairwell-

“Whaaa-!”

OH FUCK-

Lapis reached out and tried to telekinetically grab onto Twilight- and for a moment, it worked, Twilight’s fall slowing midair, her neck rotating away from the edge of a stair as a coat of Lapis’ brown magic wrapped around her. Then, suddenly, Lapis’ grip snapped like a rubber band, and Twilight’s fall resumed, Lapis helpless to do anything but watch as she rolled down the stairs and out of sight, yelping in pain with every bump.

Oh shit. Oh shit, did I just-

“Twilight!” a voice echoed from the inside of the cellar, as Spike hurried over to peer down. “You came over to visit mah new apple-cellar! How nice! ...Twi? You okay? Uh, Twi?”

Spike must’ve caught sight of Twilight, because he let out a sigh of relief, then winced. Lapis felt himself relaxing a little. *Okay. I think she’s alive.*

“...I think I just sprained my fetlocks,” Twilight’s voice echoed up, and this time Lapis sighed with relief, too. “Applejack, why in Equestria did you leave that door open?!”

“Whuh- Ah did no such thing, sugarcube,” Applejack’s voice echoed up, and Lapis swallowed. *Oh, bad bad bad. She must’ve gotten back here during the detour. Shit!* “Didn’t you walk across it a few moments ago?”

“I don’t know, but I saw it swinging open!” Spike called down. “That’s amazing, Pinkie totally called it!”

Twilight groaned, more in annoyance than pain, and Lapis suddenly remembered why he was hiding in a bush. He looked over at Pinkie, and saw that she was just turning away from the cellar door, bouncing off into the orchards. *Okay. There's Pinkie, there's Twilight, there's Applejack and Spike. I don't hear anypony in the barn, so as soon as I've got an opening, I take it.*

A few seconds later, Applejack emerged from the barn, an annoyed-looking Twilight slung across her back like a sack of potatoes. "C'mon, Twi, let's get you to Ponyville General. They'll have some braces for your fetlocks, Ah'm sure of it."

"Thanks, Applejack," Twilight muttered, and Lapis held his breath as her gaze swept over the bush where he was hiding, ready to recite the invisibility incantation at a moment's notice - then, she and Applejack passed by, Spike following behind. Lapis waited until they were down the road and out of sight, then he emerged from the bush, tucking the mask into his saddlebag, and darted into the barn.

Shit, he thought, peering up into the dark of the rafters and searching for any sign of a crack. *Too close. Way too close.*

Bon Bon had explained the whole Pinkie-Sense deal to him not long after they'd met. He'd been skeptical initially, but after seeing how seriously Bon Bon seemed to take it, he decided to humor her - and, the first time he'd seen Pinkie's tail twitching, he'd ducked for cover just in time to dodge one of Derpy Hooves' finer landings. After that, no further convincing was required...

Except maybe it should've been, Lapis thought, scanning the shadowed rafters for any sign of a crack. *Maybe I should've had a little less faith in Pinkie Pie's muscle spasms. Maybe then I wouldn't have ended up putting Twilight in danger, again.*

He spotted the crack, and one flash of light and burst of heat on his flank later, the rafter was whole. *I need to be more careful.*

Lapis got out of Sweet Apple Acres almost without further incident - on his way out, he spotted Big Mac cresting a hill. They exchanged a wave, but Lapis headed for the hills before any further hospitalities could take place. After all, there were a lot of arches in the Town Hall.

Once Lapis got back to Ponyville, and confirmed that Rainbow had wrapped up her duties, he immediately set about clearing out as much of his backlog as possible. He didn't manage to get to the arches in Town Hall, but he took care of at least a third of the backlog, mostly by skipping all the other roofing jobs. *Those, I'm saving for cool weather, so I don't end up dripping sweat into somepony's roof again.*

The following morning, Lapis had just finished breakfast and was getting ready to check his workload for the day when a knock came at his door. A quick glance through the window confirmed that it was Mayor Mare, and so he opened it up. "Hey, how's it going?"

"Busy, but forget me, Lapis, how are you?" Mayor Mare said, quickly making her way inside. "Only three days out of the hospital, and already back to work?"

"Yep. Much as I wish I could rest, this town doesn't fix itself," Lapis confirmed. "What brings you over here, anyway? I doubt you're just checking in."

Mayor Mare nodded. "Unfortunately, you're right. While you were... indisposed, I knew you were looking for the blueprints of this building, and it got me a little curious, myself. So, I went digging in the archives, and as it turns out, those blueprints don't exist."

Lapis blinked. "You're sure?"

"Positive," Mayor Mare confirmed. "I went looking before and after Ms. Sparkle re-organized the building, and I couldn't see so much as one square inch of this house's plans."

Uh-oh. "Okay, weird question, but did you just say Twilight Sparkle re-organized your archives? Like, on her own?"

Mayor Mare's ears pricked up, and a faint crease appeared on her brow. "Well... yes, I did. Once she'd finished writing up the damage report, she was kind enough to offer me a summary of the magical principles involved in your... incident, and that wound up including a full re-organization of the Town Hall archives."

"You had her write a damage report," Lapis asked, panic rising in his gut.

"I did, but... well, Ms. Heartstrings had a word with me about your relations, and I made sure not to tell Ms. Sparkle that you were the responsible pony," Mayor Mare said. "...I'm sorry if I'm intruding, Lapis, but what happened between you and the Element Bearers? They're nice ponies, and I'd hate to think they've made some sort of mistake."

"It's not that anything happened," Lapis quickly said, "it's more that... well, I've been in Ponyville for a little longer than a month now, and they've been responsible for about a third of the broken stuff I've fixed - more, if you count Rainbow. ...That reminds me, actually," Lapis added, "have you ever heard of something called 'restricted airspace' before?"

Mayor Mare chuckled. "I have, but somehow, I doubt Ms. Dash would constrain herself by it. Besides, she *is* captain of the weather team, so technically she's doing her job up there."

"Oh. Well, there goes that plan," Lapis sighed. "I mean, I guess she's making me money and all, but still..."

"Yes, I expect the local thatchmakers are very confident in their job security," Mayor Mare agreed. "Oh! Right, I almost forgot. It's not only the blueprints for your house that are missing, though I'll likely be sending somepony over to conduct a survey of your property shortly. There's also no record of the last... well, of any of the previous ponies who lived here, at least none that I could find."

"That's... disturbing," Lapis muttered. "So, another weird question, but have you mentioned any of this to Bon Bon?"

Mayor Mare cocked her head. “Bon Bon? No, I can’t say I have. Why, do you think she might be able to shed some light on the situation?”

“Call it a hunch, but yeah, I get the feeling she’ll wanna know,” Lapis replied. *If I’m lucky, she’ll be able to take care of... whatever this is, before it affects me.* “Oh, yeah. You turned in a job about the rafters and arches in Town Hall, right?”

“Oh, that, yes,” Mayor Mare said, waving a hoof. “That’s just another consultation, feel free to save it for last. There’s nothing wrong that I can find, the building just sounds a little bit... creaky, lately, and I wanted some more experienced eyes to make sure the Parasprites hadn’t eaten anything structurally important.”

“Alright, then the arches and the support pillars are happening today,” Lapis said, “because I’m sure nopony in Ponyville wants Town Hall getting run out of tents. The rafters will have to wait, though. I’m saving all my roofwork up for one day, just so that I can get it all over with at once.”

“Be sure not to let it sit too long,” Mayor Mare said, turning for the door. “I tried saving up some paperwork for a ‘Taxes Day’ last month, and I ended up putting it off for...” Mayor Mare paused, briefly tapping her chin with her hoof. Then her eyes widened, and for several uncomfortable seconds, she stared off into space.

“Oh,” she eventually said, then she had a quick, nervous laugh. “Well, I guess I’d better be going, then!”

“See you around!” Lapis called, as the Mayor started trotting back toward Town Hall. Then, shaking his head in amusement, he grabbed another sheaf off his request board, and started looking it over, quickly re-pinning the roofing jobs back to the board. Nothing too unusual, just an extra-large helping of his normal work, until...

...Oh, come on! Really?! Again?!

He had another job request from Sweet Apple Acres - this time, though, instead of a rafter, the request simply read 'Re-attach blade to lumber sled.'

At this rate, Lapis thought, I might need to write her a letter or something.

...No, that would be insane. 'Dear Applejack, despite the fact that we've never met, and that you've never expressed any good regard for me to anypony I talk to on a regular basis, I believe that all the repair jobs you're sending me are secretly attempts to get me to stay over for dinner. While I appreciate your unspoken invitations, I fear I must decline, as I am severely allergic to the color orange. Apologies and well-wishes, Lapis Print. P.S. - paint won't work; I've tried.'

Maybe I'd better drop by the next time she's out of town? Lapis thought, slowly gearing up for the other jobs on his list. Have dinner with the Apple family, without Applejack?

...That might work. Okay, so that's the theory, but in the meantime...

Lapis looked at the repair sheet again, then swallowed. *In the meantime, I need to fix this railing, or eventually she might decide to just show up here and wait.*

If I'm lucky, she'll be in the orchards when I arrive. If I'm unlucky...

As soon as Lapis saw Applejack, he knew something was off.

For one thing, she was dragging the lumber sled that he'd been hired to fix, even despite its detached rail. The rail was sitting atop the lumber sled, and Lapis only needed one look to know he'd be able to repair it inside of five seconds - it was broken right down the middle, but as breaks went, it was pretty clean.

For another thing... well, Lapis didn't know Applejack very well, but if that squint in her eyes was anything to judge by, she was feeling determined about something. *Or stubborn. Maybe both. ...Yeah, probably both.*

As Lapis observed from just behind the crest of a nearby hill, Applejack dragged the sled to the very bottom of the hill on which the Apple family barn sat. Then, after glancing briefly back at the house, she sat down, staring down along the road that led to Ponyville. And then, she did the one thing that Lapis was most afraid she would do.

She waited.

Shit, Lapis thought. Keep calm. I've got this. Think.

The sled is a five-second fix. I need to get in, get it done, and get out - without giving her any more reason to come hunt me down.

I've gotta fix the sled today. That's just a given. I fixed the rafter the day she delivered the order, I need to be consistent, or else.

I've also got to get the rest of my backlog done today. Ergo, I can't just wait around here forever - either Applejack gives up inside of, let's say, half an hour, or I need to get her away from the sled somehow.

Lapis ducked back down below the top of the hill, then started rifling through his saddlebags, ignoring the wetness at his back - it must've rained the night before, because the grass was half-soaked with dew. Any distraction I come up with needs to not seem like a distraction. I can't just make any random loud noise, it needs to seem like something that could normally happen in an apple orchard...

...Wait, why is the Happy Sauce in here?

Lapis frowned, then levitated the bottle of glowing, rainbow-hued hot sauce out of his bag. "Did Nikki put this in here?" he muttered, then he inspected the bottle again. *Maybe I grabbed it when I was packing, somehow?*

Something about the bottle was niggling at him, and as Lapis stared down at that sharply-painted smiley face, he realized what it was - the color. The rainbow color.

Hadn't Bon Bon said something about the Apple family having rainbow-colored apples?

And all at once, a plan formed in his head. It was quick, easy, and it even fit with the same bizarre cartoon logic that seemed to explain Pinkie's behavior.

I take an apple, Lapis thought, and I coat it in the Happy Sauce, so it'll look close enough to a Zap-Apple. I pick a hill, far from me, and I get the apple to roll down it, so it just happens to stop near Applejack. Applejack sees it, thinks it's a Zap-Apple, and thinks that either the trees have bloomed early or that some animal is pilfering her crop. Either way, she runs off to go check, I fix the lumber cart, and hopefully that's enough.

Grinning, Lapis levitated an apple off one of the nearby trees and unstoppered the bottle of Happy Sauce. *If I'm really lucky, she might even take a bite of it, and go run to get some water...*

...to wash the sauce down with.

Lapis hesitated, a drop of the Happy Sauce dangling from the neck of the bottle just an inch or two above the surface of the apple, the condiment shimmering in the sunlight. Maybe it was only because he could smell it, but all of a sudden, that same awful spicy taste was back in his mouth, glued right back onto his tongue, the roof of his mouth, searing itself into the back of his throat...

And everything he remembered had come from *one* drop.

The drop split from the neck of the bottle, falling toward the apple's shining surface, and Lapis yanked the apple out of the way, righting and corking the bottle. *Wait, what the HELL am I thinking?! Didn't I just decide I needed to be more careful?!*

It would work. Somehow, Lapis knew it would work, and that knowledge was just enough to make him hesitate. Then, setting his jaw, he returned the bottle of Happy Sauce to his saddlebags. *Nope. Not gonna happen. I'll find another way-*

“Applejack!” a deep voice twanged, and Lapis froze, his eyes snapping open as he pressed himself flat against the back of the hill.

“Oh! Uh, Big Macintosh!” he heard Applejack reply. “What brings you out here?”

“What’s keepin’ you out here?” Big Mac asked, and Lapis hazarded another glance over top of the hill. Big Mac didn’t look mad, but he was certainly confused. “Applejack, Ah know you know we gotta get the rest of those apples into the apple-cellar. Y’all aren’t waitin’ for that repair-pony to show up, are you?”

“Well... yes Ah am,” Applejack said, “and Ah mean to keep waitin’ till he comes around.”

“Didn’t you say yesterday mornin’ he had half a tree’s worth of paper tacked to his request board?” Big Macintosh asked. “He’s a busy pony, Applejack. Y’all know he’s up to his eyeballs in leftovers from the Parasprites. Ah’m sure he’ll have a moment of free time eventually-”

“You’re darn right, Ah know he’s busy, and that’s the problem!” Applejack said, stepping forward and putting her hoof down. “Big Mac, between the two of us, which one knows better what a village wrecked by three-hundred-some-odd bunny rabbits looks like?”

Big Mac paused, cocking an eyebrow. “Well, Ah’d say you would, considerin’-”

“Wrong.” Applejack drew herself to her full height. “You do, Big Mac. An’ Ah know you do, because Ah was so tired, all Ah can remember is one big, blurry blob. Now, since you know that, about how much time do y’all think it took this Lapis feller to clean up after that bunny stampede?”

About a day and a half, Lapis thought. Big Mac, not being telepathic, remained silent.

“When Ah took Twilight to Ponyville General,” Applejack said, “an’ mentioned in passin’ to the nurse that Ah was waitin’ to get that rafter

fixed, she said that the repair-pony had only gotten outta bed two days ago. That's three days, now, but three days ain't enough time to recover, Big Mac. You know it ain't."

"...E-yup," Big Mac admitted. "But Ah don't think you've seen this pony fixin' stuff, either. Ah have, and from what Ah've seen, it's not nearly so taxin' as apple-buckin'."

"Big Mac," Applejack began, but Big Macintosh put his hoof on her shoulder. "This ain't his apple-buckin' season, Applejack. Ah'll bet that won't happen 'til the winter snows come down. But ours is still happenin' right now, and we've got enough to do already, without workin' up a sweat over every guest an' greetin'. You wanna make sure nopeny pushes themselves too hard?" He reached down, then poked Applejack in the chest. "Start with this one. Now, c'mon, the sooner we get those apples into the cellar, the sooner we can start with the cider."

Applejack sighed, her ears flopping back. "Alright, Ah hear ya. But we will get him over for supper if Ah see him drop by, Big Mac. Difficult labor or not, if he really has that little spare time, it'll do him good to get a mite behind on his work."

Sure won't, Lapis thought, as Applejack and Big Mac headed back up the hill. As soon as they were over the hill and out of sight, he hurried over to the wagon, jamming the sled back into place and shutting his eyes. He blinked in time with the flash of light, and felt the burst of heat on his flank, but that was all it took - when he opened his eyes, the sled was fixed.

As Lapis turned to leave, he paused, Big Mac's words reverberating in his head. "This ain't his apple-buckin' season..."

Please be wrong, he thought.

Then he started back down the road into Ponyville at a quick trot.

The rest of his workday was more standard fare until around four-thirty, which was when Lapis headed over to Town Hall for the Mayor's consultation. He had just arrived when Nikki touched down on his shoulder. Lapis gave her a quick boop on the beak, to which Nikki responded by lightly cuffing his ear. Then, they headed inside.

As it turned out, the Mayor tended to keep the interior of the Hall in a bare-bones, no-frills condition whenever the Princess wasn't in town. Lapis wasn't a fan, but he had to admit, it really brought out the Roman look of the building. With all the indented pillars, it almost felt like a government building back on Earth... well, except for the gaping hole in the wall.

What the Mayor didn't do, though, was hire anypony to dust the place. Every shaft of light from the numerous windows was highlighted with a thousand swirling motes, and Lapis found his nose itching after only a few steps inside the building.

The Mayor was waiting for him in front of the stage, staring up toward the balcony that overlooked the rest of the room. She seemed lost in thought, her lips silently moving as she stared up at the blackness between the curtains.

Lapis walked up beside her, glanced up at the balcony, and decided to take a wild guess. "I still can't believe it's only been a month."

Mayor Mare blinked, jerking out of her reverie at once. "Oh! My apologies, Lapis, I didn't even hear you come in!" She chuckled, then sighed and stared back up at the balcony again. "But, yes. I was thinking much the same myself. Sometimes, I swear it still smells like a storm in here."

The sound of Nightmare Moon's insane laughter echoed in Lapis' ears, but he let the twist of sympathetic emotion wash over him without reaction.

"Well, at least nopony got hurt... And at least she's better now. Princess Luna, I mean."

"Yes, there is that at least." The Mayor cleared her throat. "Well, I suppose we'd better get to business. It feels like this building's been creaking in the wind a bit more than usual lately, which is why I hired you to come in and check it out. Just... tighten the bolts and patch up the cracks, I suppose."

“Makes sense,” Lapis said, nodding and looking over the building. “You know, it’s not unusual at all for a building to move with the wind. Better to bend and stand back up than to fall over stiff.”

“Yes... Lapis, am I a bad mayor?”

Lapis paused, Nikki fluttering her wings to keep her balance as he stopped.
“What?”

“Me,” Mayor Mare said, her ears flicking back. “I mean, first it’s finding the carpenter-ponies to put together a new section of wall, then it’s your missing paperwork, and now it’s a six-inch stack of tax papers on my desk.

“And besides,” she added, “I’ve been thinking, and... when all that nastiness with Nightmare- eh, I mean, Princess Luna - happened, I just... panicked. Everything felt like it was falling down around me, and I tried to help keep things in order, but before I knew it, the whole town was screaming and running in circles. It took you and Bon Bon coming in to stop things from getting worse, and even then, I couldn’t figure out how to make it better without her practically telling me what to do!”

The Mayor sighed, lowering her head. “I feel like... it might be better for Ponyville if I weren’t the one in charge. If maybe somepony else was running things, instead of me.”

Lapis hesitated, then slowly turned to face the Mayor. *Well, shit. What am I supposed to say, here?*

“...I mean, I could be wrong,” Lapis began, “but I haven’t seen anypony else in town with a sealed decree on their flank.”

Wait, how long have I been saying ‘everypony’ for? ...Later. That’s a crisis for later. Deal with this one first. And speaking of crises...

As Mayor Mare looked up, Lapis remembered how he’d almost risked giving Applejack chemical burns in her mouth. Then, he realized who hadn’t needed to stop and think, and suddenly he knew what to say.

“And, for what it’s worth, you and the rest of this town were confronted by the stuff of nightmares,” Lapis said. “Of course you panicked, all of you. What’s different about you is that when *you* panicked, your instinct was to help everypony else. You put them first. That might not be the reason you got your Mark, but - at least in my books - it does make you Mayor material. Make sense?”

Mayor Mare hesitated, then slowly nodded, a smile spreading across her face. “...Well, yes. When you put it that way, I suppose it does.”

“Good,” Lapis said, feeling a relieved grin spread across his own face. “So, Ms. Mayor, where do you need me to check first?”

“Oh! Right, yes. If you could look over the top of those pillars, by the north window...”

Lapis levitated his ladder over, climbed up, and started examining the pillars. They were, as far as he could tell, undamaged - he wasn’t enough of an architect to judge how tight the bolts should be, but they didn’t look like they were rusted or anything, so that was close enough for him. “All looking good so far,” Lapis called out, briefly glancing out the window. *I wonder if I can see my house from here... Nope. Yeah, it's on the other side, right.*

“Alright,” Mayor Mare called back. “Well, keep going, and if you find anything, let me know. And... thank you, Lapis, for letting me drop that on you. I’m feeling much better now.”

“Least I could do,” Lapis replied, climbing down the ladder and moving on to the next pillars.

He didn’t end up finding anything. Lapis left Town Hall after about half an hour, barely fending off the Mayor’s third apology for her apparent lapse, and headed back for his shop. Despite himself, he smiled at the sight of his request board. Halfway done. At this rate, I’ll be able to slow down again in... about two days, assuming Roof Day doesn’t-

“Uh, pardon me, Lapis?”

“Hey, how’s it-,” Lapis said, turning to see who’d spoken - and stopped, his eyes widening as he realized it was Big Macintosh.

Lapis didn’t see any sign of Applejack, but he tried to ready the invisibility incantation, just in case. “Oh hey, what’s up, Big Mac? Thanks for the cider, by the way, it’s been great so far.”

“Don’t mention it,” Big Mac said. “Glad to see you outta the hospital and drinkin’ it. Ah was just over here to drop off the bits for fixin’ up that rafter and the sled, but... well, Ah was wonderin’, are you avoidin’ mah sister at all?”

Shit. “Uh, you mean Applejack? The Element Bearer? No way, what makes you think I’ve been avoiding her?”

Big Mac shrugged. “Well, it’s likely just a coincidence, but somehow or another, all three times you dropped by to fix somethin’, she wasn’t around to see you do it.”

“Huh,” Lapis said, rubbing the back of his neck, and doing everything he could to not let his ears flop back. “That’s... surprising. Maybe I just have bad timing, or something?”

“E-yup,” Big Mac said. “That’s what Ah thought. ...Oh, and Ah see you’ve been puttin’ a dent in that corkboard of yours.”

“Yep, sure have,” Lapis said. *Yes. Please. Ask me about my workload, not Applejack. Anything but Applejack.* “I’ll have it blank two days from now, at this rate.”

“E-yup. That’s still an awful lot of stuff to fix all by yourself, though,” Big Mac said, staring up at the workload. “Are you sure you’re not overworkin’ yourself? Not at all?”

...Anything but that, or Applejack. “Not gonna lie, it’s rough,” Lapis sighed. “But I’ll make it just fine. I’ve pulled off crazier stuff before, and I’ll

probably do it again.”

Big Mac cocked an eyebrow, then sighed, and for half a second, something that looked like an exasperated grin flashed across his face. “Well, if you say so. Anyway, Ah better get you your bits and get on back, ‘fore Granny Smith gets to wonderin’ why Ah’m takin’ so long. Y’all should drop by sometime, Ah think she’s fixin’ to make a pie soon.”

“Oh, thanks,” Lapis said, as Big Mac reached into his own saddlebags and presented Lapis with a surprisingly hefty sack of bits. “See you around, Big Mac!”

“See you!” Big Mac replied. Then, Big Mac turned and headed down the street, rounding a corner toward Sweet Apple Acres and vanishing from sight.

As soon as Big Mac was gone, Lapis stepped inside his home, shut the door, and immediately slumped against it, sitting on the floor with a *thump*.

“I’ve gotta get out of here,” he muttered. “I need to get some time to stop, and think things through, and let stuff here cool off.”

Slowly, he stood back up and plodded over to his basement, scuffing through a large, dusty hoofprint near the counter. When he reached the basement, he sat at the workbench, staring down at the single piece of wooden shrapnel that he’d saved from the mana concentrator. Then, he turned to glance around at his half-eaten rack of tools.

It’s only gonna get harder, he realized. Avoiding them, without causing any extra trouble. It’s only going to get more difficult, unless I meet them, and I can’t let that happen. Magic isn’t enough - I need better equipment, too.

Absently, he picked up a slightly-chewed copper ingot from a stack beside the anvil, levitating it over to his side. Most of the words on its surface were too tooth-marked to read, but one glimmered against the surface of the ingot:

‘AMBERHOOF’.

Author's Notes:

Patch Notes:

- Replaced all mentions of “Zebrica” with “Farasi.” The nation of Farasi is, in the IDW comics, an off-the-map coastal region that also happens to be Zecora’s home country (named after the Swahili word for “horse.”) For the curious, Zecora’s specific hometown is Zebrat, the capital city of Farasi, and Twilight and the gang head over there in the first arc of the comics’ 10th season.
- Corrected “it” to “it was.” This issue may have been caused by partial corruption of Bon Bon’s dialogue generation algorithm, which may in turn have been caused by low system power at the time of generation. (Winter Star)
- Corrected “needed fixed” to “needed to be fixed.” See previous. (Softy Soft)

Alrighty, so, hey! Welcome back, and - for all of you who understood the non-metaphorical parts of Lapis’ dream sequence - Rock and Stone!

Actually, about that dream sequence. A few of the comments you guys have been making is stuff like “But what if Luna sees one of his dreams?” Well, maybe normal Equestrians have dreams that are more like flashbacks, but Lapis is a human from Earth - and, like most humans from Earth, that means his dreams tend to be a little loopier than that. (Especially when they may or may not be influenced by food with extreme spice of a dubious origin.) And, to be clear, I was careful to make sure Lapis’ dream made a lot more sense than mine usually do - or maybe my subconscious symbolism is just less heavy-handed than my conscious symbolism?

The trapdoor into Applejack's apple cellar. What you just read represents attempt number 3 to resolve why that door swung open just in time for Twilight to drop in, while Applejack was far enough down inside to not see Twilight until she reaches the bottom of the staircase. Attempt 1 was that Lapis dropped Twilight in on purpose, but... well, that ended up contradicting his entire development for the chapter, so no. Attempt 2 was a little more interesting: Applejack heard Lapis walking over the door, thought somepony was knocking, and opened the door to see no-one there; so, she headed back downstairs and got all the way into the basement just in time to be there when Twilight fell down to greet her. Rewatching the episode led me to scrap that theory - the in-episode timing just doesn't work, it's too quick for that.

(You may also have noticed that I didn't touch on Princess Celestia being around to drop out of the sky. That would've been another potential tie-in, and it might even have made sense for the story - but, well, if I explained all of Pinkie's mysteries, she just wouldn't feel like Pinkie anymore. Therefore, I hereby and henceforth certify that, whatever Princess Celestia was doing near Ponyville during *Feeling Pinkie Keen*, it had absolutely nothing to do with Lapis Print.)

And finally, those of you who remember certain portions of the dialogue of *Feeling Pinkie Keen* might remember that Pinkie says something interesting, when Twilight confronts her about knowing that she was watching. This line comes off as typical Pinkie absurdity, mostly because it is... ~~but what if~~ okay no I wasn't actually smart enough to write that into the chapter, but it would be really cool if I were.

See you in the next one!

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